

Between Anchoring and Elsewhere

Aspects of Place in Northern Irish Poetry

Péter Dolmányos

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Between Anchoring and Elsewhere. Aspects of place in Northern Irish poetry

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Preface

There can be little doubt that it is not the internal development of literature or of linguistic environment that explains why Ulster, of the four historic provinces of Ireland (in fact only six of its nine counties) is by critical consent considered to have a distinct poetry. Northern Irish poetry as a literary category is relatively new and, of course, rather malleable. The influence of historical and political events is obvious. But is it not a testament to the power of words that poetry has been able to provide such a powerful response to a long-standing problem? Was it not precisely because the situation seemed insoluble that poetry was able to provide such a responsible and epoch-making response?

Ulster had been early on exposed to English conquest because of its geographical proximity, and from the 17th century, when King James I colonised Ireland, the population of the province changed dramatically. In a small area, an unusual linguistic diversity emerged: by the 19th century, Ulster English, a distinctive dialect, became dominant, while Gaeltacht remained quite high in relation to English and to the whole of Ireland. The language of the Scottish immigrants, Ulster Scots, is still present today. The linguistic stratification, however, is an imprint of Irish-English ethnic, Catholic-Protestant religious, and social class divide that from time to time erupted into a violent conflict and after Partition and then in the 1970s took the form of a civil war.

The area of just 14,000 square kilometres has been encumbered by too many historical and social tensions. Of the countless similar places in the world, Northern Ireland certainly stands out in that its cultural tradition has consistently articulated these problems at an exceptionally high level. In the once stifling neighbourhood of one of the world's leading powers, but, as a consequence of being brutally deprived of native Irish, in the language that came to dominate the world after the Second World War, the voice of these poets, most influentially of Seamus Heaney's, sounded loud and far.

It goes without saying that the new generation could rely on predecessors. Belfast-born poet John Hewitt (1907-1987), who is not included in these essays since he belongs to an earlier generation than the authors under discussion, thought that the right answer to the Northern Irish situation lay in the idea of regionalism. Everyone is born somewhere, everyone lives somewhere, everyone has a higher and deeper attachment to a place than that dictated by ethnicity or religious doctrine or ideology. There are many borders, and although they can be closed both physically and spiritually, the blockade is never permanent. Regionalism is Europeanism itself, because it recognises

that every square metre of territory is made up of layers of history and culture that are inextricably intertwined, and because every square metre of territory can only be described by a diversity of languages and cultures.

Unfortunately, this idea cannot be said to have permeated Northern Irish society. As the English poet W. H. Auden, born in the same year as Hewitt, put it in a poem he wrote on the death of W. B. Yeats in January of the portentous year 1939, “poetry makes nothing happen”. A few months later with the outbreak of World War II, Auden soon experienced how true this was. Poetry never prevented wars from breaking out, never put an end to massacres. But that is not to be expected of it.

While regionalism remained a wonderful humanist idea, it anticipated the voices of the great range of poets to emerge in the North of Ireland from the 1960s onwards. The title of John Montague’s seminal book, *The Rough Field* (1972), refers to Northern Ireland as both a concrete and symbolic place, and the title poem of Michael Longley’s first volume, 1969, *No Continuing City*, celebrates his forthcoming marriage with a metaphor of geographical location. Derek Mahon placed his poem “Spring in Belfast” (first published as “In Belfast”) at the head of both *Collected Poems* (1999) and *New Collected Poems* (2011), and his other poems also abound with Irish geographical locations. As do Seamus Heaney’s collections and poem titles. He took account of Northern Ireland as a place in a series of essays such as “Mossbawn”, “Belfast”, “The Sense of Place”, “Frontiers of Writing”. Even his essay on his great predecessor bears the title “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh”. One of his most important essays on the subject is entitled “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland”.

But there is another side to the question. Seamus Heaney did not consider himself a Northern Irish poet, but as an Irish poet born in Northern Ireland. Montague, Mahon, Longley are usually listed as Irish poets in handbooks and anthologies. Examples abound. Just to mention a few, the fine poet and editor Frank Ormsby made this subtle distinction in the title of his *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1979), that included poets from the generation of Hewitt and MacNeice to Montague and the Heaney-Mahon-Longley trio, to Medbh McGuckian to Tom Paulin to Paul Muldoon. Paul Muldoon, however, includes much the same poets – with the addition of Patrick Kavanagh, and some others – in his *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986). Peter McDonald, who also appeared as a poet in Ormsby’s anthology, analyses the problem of Northern Irish identity from a post-nationalist perspective in his book *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (1997).

The term Northern Irish poetry seems to be the result of a process of canonisation that also included the search for tradition. Edna Longley has done a lot for this in her magisterial collections of literary essays. It is in no small part thanks to the efforts of Edna Longley that the poetry of Louis MacNeice has been reframed as a possible model for Northern Irish poets while retaining his status as a key member of the 1930s Auden group. He was born in Belfast, studied and lived in England, but his poetry often visits places like Belfast,

Carrickfergus, and Dublin or Sligo, albeit always with a northern outsider's eye. Thus he was quite suitable to be a kind of ancestor, a father figure for the new generation of poets. Though not exclusively. He was looked upon by Michael Longley as Patrick Kavanagh was by Heaney.

This also shows that, although Northern Irish Poetry is a controversial category, it is for this same reason that its boundaries are flexible, open. Northern Ireland as a geographic and political entity has created a distinctive poetry.

Péter Dolmányos captures the essence of Northern Irish poetry when he makes aspects of place the organising principle of his study. In the book, he examines the work of four Irish poets, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. All four have recently completed their oeuvres. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that they themselves created the core of what is by critical consensus regarded as Northern Irish poetry. They did it, above all, by the way in which the theme of place, fraught with tensions and prejudices, endangered but with the hopeful possibility of transcending conflicts, appears in their works.

Péter Dolmányos's book is the result of two decades of systematic and persistent research. From the outset, his interest has focused on the problematics of the specificity of Northern Irish poetry. In his book he summarises his research in eight separate but closely related studies. Rather than drawing portraits of poets or writing a history of poetry, he explores how the four emblematic poets developed their own notions of place that is reflected in their poetry, and what differences and correspondences exist in the interplay of their oeuvres which are drawn from different backgrounds and elaborated distinctive poetics.

The introductory chapter clarifies the sense in which the term 'place' is used, separating it from the overlapping terms 'space', 'ground', 'location'. It relates the concept of place to the medieval Irish topographical poetic genre, the *dinnséanchas*.

The next chapter elucidates Seamus Heaney's sense of place as he addressed the issue in a series of landmark essays. Dolmányos forcefully argues that Heaney, thoroughly reading his predecessors and contemporaries – while also relying on his personal experiences – comes to the conclusion that there exist two complementary concepts of Ulster, the region in its geographical reality and its culturally constructed mental imprint, the 'image' of the place that he calls "Ulster of the mind". Although Heaney and two of his close fellows, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, are closely linked by their common beginnings in the years immediately before the Troubles broke out, Heaney's rural and Catholic background contrasts with their urban, Protestant ancestry. This, it goes without saying, is not a sectarian division yet as Dolmányos demonstrates in his meticulous analyses, makes itself felt in their respective poetics. Mahon's scepticism concerning the relationship between place and community in Ulster leads him naturally from the disused shed in Wexford to international scenes. For Longley, the equivalent of place is 'home', but his sense of home seems to be doubled by his second home in the West of Ireland

(a 'home from home', i.e. country house, holiday cottage). An island of peace in contrast to tormented Belfast.

His *tusculanum*, leads on to the next two chapters, which discuss the presence and meaning of pastoral poetry, first in Montague's *The Rough Field* and then in Heaney's version of a pastoral, the 'Glanmore Sonnets'. Since Virgil's eclogues, the pastoral tradition has turned to the idyll of peaceful life in times of threat of violence. Pastoral scenes are places of the mind in contrast to the real ones that had fallen victim to the devastations of war. Idylls, so to say, bear a political message of resistance.

The penultimate essay examines how the radical appearance of otherness and elsewhere in Mahon's poems offer an approach to the question of place in Northern Ireland, as also does Montague's poetic transgressions of boundaries. These two essays, while providing a conclusion to the profound research carried out in the book, also open it up for further considerations regarding the four emblematic poets treated here or even beyond their generation.

The double merit of Péter Dolmányos's set of essays is their firm structure and the impressive amount of up-to-date literature that support his argument. The external eye, since, after all, he is conducting his research in Hungary, will hopefully provide readers of this book with new perspectives.

Győző Ferencz

Executive President of Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts

Orientation: Approaches to Place in Northern Irish Poetry

Seamus Heaney claims in a 1985 essay that “[e]ach person in Ulster lives first in the Ulster of the actual present, and then in one or other Ulster of the mind.”¹ In a telling manner, the full title of the essay is “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland”, indicating the special importance of the concept of place in the cultural context of the province. A number of other Heaney prose pieces also work with place as a central orienting factor when addressing poetry written in Ireland, South and North alike, and the idea of interaction between an actual and a mental location is already mentioned in his 1977 lecture entitled “The Sense of Place” in the image of a “marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind.”² The insistence on the duality of the sense of location and their relationship, with an acute sense of dynamism that such a relation implies, is a clear indication of the importance Heaney attributes to place for poetry. In an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977, Heaney recounted the origin of his poetry in an intriguing way: “I think that my own poetry is a kind of slow, obstinate, papish burn, emanating from the ground I was brought up on.”³ Although the scope of this idea is more inclusive by its hint at the communal cultural significance of “ground”, its inclusion of place in that context is also clearly formulated. His reading of other poets in the essays also pays attention to the role of place in their respective works, which eventually allows for a much broader application of his approach than the context of his own practice.

Heaney’s assertion aligns with several critical positions that point out the importance of place in Irish poetry. As Ailbhe McDaid notes with a general reference, “[t]he well-recognised synchronicity between place and poet has often provided the dominant critical paradigm of interpreting Irish poetry in the 20th century.”⁴ Several studies include explicitly the word ‘place’ in their titles, marking it as an essential component of the poetic practice of contemporary poets, especially from Northern Ireland. Critical responses, however, are stimulated by a long-standing relation between place and poet expressed

¹ Seamus Heaney, “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland”, *The Agni Review*, 1985. No. 22 (1985), 161

² Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-78*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1980), 132

³ Seamus Deane, . “‘Unhappy and at Home’. Interview with Seamus Heaney.” *The Crane Bag* 1.1, 67

⁴ Ailbhe McDaid, *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), xii

in various traditions from the *dinnséanchas* to contemporary engagement with issues of spatial considerations. Although that relation has shown significant synchronic variety as well as diachronic change, its relevance as a fundamental motif has persisted despite shifting economic, social and cultural scenarios.

This prevalence of place in Irish poetry is part of a broader cultural agenda. Neal Alexander outlines this phenomenon in a neat summary: “[c]onceptions of space and place receive a notably complex series of inflection in the Irish context: whether in terms of Ireland’s history of conquest and colonial subjugation; its longstanding emigrant diaspora and newer immigrant populations; the legacy of partition and competing territorial claims over the North; or the discontinuous but far-reaching globalisation of Irish society since the Republic of Ireland and Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community in 1973.”⁵ His concern is principally the question of identity, a likewise heavily involved concept in relation to Ireland, with a more specific glance at Northern Ireland where the question is more saliently entangled with that of place. He also refers to Scott Brewster’s observation on the spatial concerns of the particular historical context of Ireland,⁶ with even more intricate relations when Northern Ireland is concerned, which has led to an increasing involvement of geography and elements of spatial theory in the examination of Irish culture and literature. Gerry Smyth explicitly formulates the importance of geography for historical enquiry in the Irish context in spite of its rather unusual approach as “such a methodological emphasis is curious in so far as the primary theme of Irish (cultural, political and social) history would appear to be not historical but geographical – specifically, the presence and function of a ‘special relationship’ between people and place.”⁷ In the wake of the work of Edward Soja and others for an elaboration on this approach, he calls attention to the fact that romantic nationalism would incorporate this idea from the outset, advancing the notion of a profound and essential link between culture and place⁸, all the more discernible with island people according to Benedict Kiely.⁹ Alexander points out the specific nature of this relation in Northern Ireland as “the conflicting but also oddly congruent geopolitical discourses of Nationalism and Unionism both posit a series of mythologised identifications whereby land and community, people and place are understood as mutually self-affirming entities.”¹⁰

The emergence of geography and spatial theory to a significantly more prominent position and of constructive power in cultural discourse against and on the expense of the prowess of temporality and consequent historicism

⁵ Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson. Space, Place, Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 13-14

⁶ Scott Brewster, “Introduction” in: Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket and David Alderson (eds.) *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (London: Routledge, 1999), 125

⁷ Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 20

⁸ cf. Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 20

⁹ Kiely quoted in Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 21

¹⁰ Alexander, *Ciaran Carson. Space, Place, Writing*, 15

is a major shift in approach. The spatial turn does not represent a full swing of the pendulum from the total hegemony of time to that of space but rather a re-balancing attempt that acknowledges the significance of space in the interpretation of experience. Taking Michel Foucault as his guide, Edward Soja traces the respective understanding of space and time since the 19th century, emphasising the essentially antithetical interpretation of the two, with space seen as “fixed, dead, undialectical”¹¹ and time as “richness, life, dialectic”.¹² Writing in the 1980s, Soja would point out the consequent movement, perhaps even a shift, towards an emphatic position of geography in critical theory for a synoptic handling of space and time, with the prospect of “a more balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space.”¹³ What necessitates such a shift is the predominantly physical view of space which “tended to imbue all things spatial with a lingering sense of primordially and physical composition, an aura of objectivity, inevitability, and reification.”¹⁴ The result of such an approach is essentially a misconstrued epistemology that does not and cannot regard space as a social construct:

Space as a physical context has generated broad philosophical interest and lengthy discussions of its absolute and relative properties (a long debate which goes back to Leibniz and beyond), its objectifiable geometry, and its phenomenological essences. But this physical space has been a misleading epistemological foundation upon which to analyse the concrete and subjective meaning of human spatiality. Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organisation, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience.¹⁵

This argument, together with Soja’s use of the phrase “production of space” alludes to the ideas set forth by Henri Lefebvre, proposing a “science of space” that could account for a more comprehensive understanding of space from its mathematical implications to its realisation as part of the social context of existence.¹⁶ The proposed theory would represent a realisation of unity between fields that Lefebvre terms physical, mental and social space. By physical space he refers to “nature, the Cosmos”,¹⁷ by mental various “logical and formal abstractions”,¹⁸ whereas in dealing with social space “we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects

¹¹ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 11

¹² Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 11

¹³ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 11

¹⁴ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 79

¹⁵ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 79-80

¹⁶ cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 8-9

¹⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11

¹⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11

and projections, symbols and utopias.”¹⁹ Social space renders the connection between space and social context an active one, and it follows from the idea of space being socially constructed that this production has historical and political constituents, which is highly apparent in the context of Northern Ireland.

With space becoming an increasingly important element of cultural analysis, the concept of place also needs a reconsideration. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, the difference between space and place on a conceptual level lies in the meaning that is attributed to a location originating from experience,²⁰ noting that the way how space is observed and understood is strongly dependent on culture since space is essentially an abstract term.²¹ Doreen Massey sees space not as something external, independently existing, fixed and completed but as “always under construction”, “always in the process of being made”,²² very much in accord with Lefebvre’s idea of space as product,²³ yet also adding emphatically the notion of process to it: consequently, in her system of terminology places are understood as “integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*.”²⁴ The inclusion of time as a constituent of place reinforces her view of space as an open category, one that requires further delineation and definition when related to the concept of place for a more precise understanding, and this approach to place apparently embodies that more balanced position that Soja anticipates in his earlier writing²⁵. In addition, the linking of space and time in the concept of place allows for an affinity with the mechanism of texts, facilitating an enhanced reading of literature. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, though principally used in the context of narratives, is a formulation that includes indicators of both space and time in the literary work,²⁶ suggesting the geographical implications of texts, and the more recent increased emphasis of spatial concerns in interpretation in turn calls attention to the textual (re)presentations of space in general and of place in particular.

The position of Northern Ireland makes for an intriguing case for cultural and literary analysis. In existence in its current form only since partition, Northern Ireland poses a number of problems even on the level of its proper definition as a unit: referred to in various terms from province or region through county to statelet, the nomenclature is indicative of the specific status of the place, and the names also carry strong historical, political and cultural overtones. In addition to the official designation Northern Ireland, ‘Ulster’ or ‘the Province’ also often cover the territory in public discourse, with

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11-12

²⁰ cf. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 3-7

²¹ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 34

²² Doreen Massey, *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), 9

²³ cf. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26-27

²⁴ Massey, *for space*, 130

²⁵ cf. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 11-12

²⁶ cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84

the counterpoint of such likewise frequently used designations as ‘the North of Ireland’, ‘the Six Counties’ and the even more clearly politically motivated ‘the Occupied Six Counties’. Encrypted in such names are various aspects of space as well as time with a clear-cut social orientation, proving the validity of the idea of space as a product rather than an a priori existing and passive category that only features as an underlying constant for human experience. The names, however, are only reflections of a situation that is generally seen as rather peculiar, especially when the broader context of the creation and the subsequent history of the province is concerned (although in this case the most recent changes concerning the composition of the population and their implications are discarded here as they fall beyond the scope of the temporal frame of the poems discussed). The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 allowed for the creation of a separate organisation of self-government for the Protestant majority of Ulster, and the subsequent decision of six Northern counties to opt out of the Free State in the December of 1922 ascertained the continued involvement of the area in the United Kingdom. Partition, however, was not the sole reason for the social situation of division in the province as it had long been sect-divided due to plantation, reaching back several centuries prior to the 20th century.

The fact that Northern Ireland remained, and still is, a part of the United Kingdom, represents the continuity of a type of political arrangement that is regularly termed colonial. Eric Falci refers to Northern Ireland as a “continuing British colony”,²⁷ and Maureen E.R. Fadem points out, when addressing the current effects of division, that “the region was excluded from the achievement of decolonisation and stands estranged.”²⁸ He also notes as causes for the persistence of tensions and violence in the province a more complex matrix of historical factors: “[p]artition was complicated, doomed to fail, some say, owing to the fact that all but six counties were decolonised and two-thirds of Ulster ‘left behind,’ as well as to the legacies of British colonialism, especially the colonial plantation of Ulster.”²⁹ David Lloyd uses the term “partial decolonisation”³⁰ to describe the situation of Ireland in the present, with the suggestion that the current state fits within the pattern of discontinuity that has characterised Irish culture for centuries. This condition of discontinuity has a bearing on the concept of the nation as well as on a corresponding territorial element, with Northern Ireland as a pivotal faction in the overall picture. As Fadem formulates it, “Northern Irish time is purgatorial, the time of waiting for some political Godot. Republicans and other nationalists expect reunification and a wholly sovereign United Ireland, whereas Loyalists and Unionists

²⁷ Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966 – 2010*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4

²⁸ Maureen E.R. Fadem, *The Literature of Northern Ireland. Spectral Borderlands* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4

²⁹ Fadem, *The Literature of Northern Ireland*, 16

³⁰ David Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity. On Irish Poetry and Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 21

cling to the idea of the legitimacy of the imperial union and colonial settlement of Ulster.”³¹ This tangible sense of unresolved historical narrative is also noted by Richard Kirkland in his observation of the pattern of the exhibition in the Ulster Museum. At the time of his enquiry, the institution identified as the “national museum for *Northern Ireland*”³² would not “stray beyond the post-partition development of Ulster”,³³ which he reads as a fragmented narrative and an expression of discontinuity, challenging historical totality, for which condition he employs the term “interregnum”.³⁴ The implications of the term involve other elements beyond the principally suggested temporal ones, with a strong consequence for the sense of identity and the resulting cultural narratives that are eventually characterised by “ellipses, gaps, discontinuities and silences”.³⁵ Such an approach also facilitates the acknowledgement of the simultaneous presence of different traditions and plural narratives, endowing the concept of place with a more dynamic set of features and potentials in its relation to the matter of identity.

The (post)colonial situation of Ireland, however, poses a number of questions due to the particular position of Ireland relative to other former colonies. While the postcolonial approach to modern Ireland is frequently employed in critical discourse, it does not happen without questioning it at the same time,³⁶ therefore it is important to point out some decisive elements that set the country apart in terms of its colonial experience. As Lloyd sums up, Ireland is “geographically of Western Europe though marginal to it and historically of the decolonising world, increasingly assimilated to that Europe, while in part still subject to a dissimulated colonialism.”³⁷ Though his list does not include the explicit reference to a shared western Christian cultural foundation and some clearly identifiable ethnic relations, the association of Ireland with Europe as a concept implies these elements as well, which eventually represent a significant set of differences compared to colonies located on other continents. This atypicality of the Irish (post)colonial experience requires caution when applying concepts regularly used in postcolonial discourse, even in the case of the term “hybridity” which appears to have more relevance than others to describe certain aspects of contemporary Irish culture and does even more so in the context of Northern Ireland. The most intriguing consequence, however, of this distinct colonial heritage is discernible in connection with the concept of place: “[w]ith peculiar intensity, Irish culture plays out the

³¹ Fadem, *The Literature of Northern Ireland*, 46

³² Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996), 1

³³ Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, 2

³⁴ cf. Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, 7

³⁵ Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, 11

³⁶ cf. Sarah Fulford, *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 18–22

³⁷ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States. Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993), 2

anomalous states of a population whose most typical experience may be that of occupying multiple locations, literally and figuratively.”³⁸

The experience of “occupying multiple locations” is rooted in the colonial past and the postcolonial present of this particularly Irish kind that makes discontinuity a prominent characteristic of culture. Lloyd throws light on the literary consequence of this by admitting that “Irish poetry has notoriously been as marked by the spectre of discontinuity as has the political culture.”³⁹ A salient aspect of discontinuity is the “separate cultural contexts of Northern Ireland and the Republic”⁴⁰ which, however, stem only in part from the separate paths and dynamism of development following partition as that “mainly exacerbated an already existing set of regional disparities.”⁴¹ There are older and deeper running fault lines that cause the fragmentation and discontinuity of the tradition and lead to the possibility of recognising the existence of more traditions rather than a single one, yet as Lloyd notes, it is the diverging paths of development of the Republic and of Northern Ireland in the course of the 1970s that account for the most salient difference in the poetry: “[n]ot only Northern Ireland’s integration within the United Kingdom, but also the continuing cultures of resistance to that integration established the conditions for a poetic practice that differed from those that prevailed in the South with its waning postcolonial consciousness and distinct path to globalisation and economic dependency.”⁴² That different poetic practice eventually legitimates the idea of a specific tradition in the context of Northern Ireland, although one that is not fully independent or separable from the broader Irish one.

As Smyth notes, “Irish poetry is widely construed as a discourse overdetermined by spatial concerns”,⁴³ fitting in with “an historical and philosophical tradition which argues that the success of any work of art depends upon the degree to which it is rooted in a familiar landscape.”⁴⁴ Although “landscape” here is more broadly understood to refer metonymically to a located sense of community and nationality, the spatial element is prominent in it in any reading of the term, making place an organic factor of literary works by connecting physical location and the realm of language. This is all the more observable in Irish poetry: as John Montague observes, “the least Irish place-name can net a world with its associations”.⁴⁵ What Montague refers to is the tradition of the *dinnséanchas*, the lore of place that constitutes the historical dimension of place-names which, however, represents a complex experience: while place names are repositories of stories of the past, the accessibility of that heritage is challenged by the colonial act of linguistic dispossession which is also a part of history itself, and so is the attempt of reclaiming that lost heritage.

³⁸ Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, 3

³⁹ Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity*, 23

⁴⁰ Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity*, 27

⁴¹ Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity*, 27

⁴² Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity*, 28

⁴³ Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 56

⁴⁴ Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 57

⁴⁵ John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave and other Essays* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1989), 43

Due to this ambivalent position of history, more attention is paid to spatial elements, and as Kirkland concludes, “the landscape becomes a mode of redemption through which the writer can mediate the politics of identity to his/her community.”⁴⁶ This points beyond the concern with the immediate physical reality of space and suggests the approach to space as a product, which in turn attributes a significant position to experience and the person of the observer:

Just as perspective, experience and training can determine the meaning that a viewing subject will draw from a particular landscape, so perspective, experience and training may also determine what kinds of spatial practices are considered worthy of the subject's gaze in the first place – that is, what is inherently relevant and/or meaningful and what, by virtue of its invisibility or incoherence, is ‘obviously’ neutral and/or existentially vacant. ‘Space’ in this sense is both the reality to be engaged (what kinds of space is the poet going to write about) and a metaphor for envisaging how the poetic subject locates itself in terms of an already inhabited poetic landscape.⁴⁷

The gaze of the subject and his location of himself in the poetic landscape also contribute to the understanding of space as product, thus poetic practice does not only reflect the spatial emphasis but has an active role in constituting it and making it a central concern in the specific context of Northern Ireland.

Although several sceptical or outright dismissive opinions have been formulated about a distinct Northern Irish tradition of poetry,⁴⁸ there is a general acknowledgement of a “well-established North-South divide”⁴⁹ to suggest different centres of poetry. Indeed, the “particular geographical, historical and cultural matrix”⁵⁰ of Northern Ireland offers a legitimate claim for a specific Northern tradition. That particular matrix includes elements that relate it to the broader Irish and/or British literary tradition but at the same time it points towards a position beyond either or both, without a claim for clear-cut absolute positioning. As a consequence of its particular context, “Northern Irish poetry complicates and enriches itself through cross-cultural *bricolage* and hybridity”⁵¹ as well as it “struggles to preserve a sense of unique identity and local attachment in the face of globalisation, interstitial migrancy and postmodern scepticism.”⁵² This dynamism of centripetal and centrifugal

⁴⁶ Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, 33

⁴⁷ Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 72

⁴⁸ cf. Thomas Kinsella (ed), *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxx; Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (eds), *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), xx; Montague, *The Figure in the Cave*, 15

⁴⁹ Jerzy Jarniewicz and John McDonagh, “Scattered and diverse: Irish poetry since 1990. In: Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (eds.) *Irish literature since 1990. Diverse voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 137

⁵⁰ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry. The American Connection* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1

⁵¹ Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry*, 2

⁵² Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry*, 2

forces⁵³ echoes the concern that Norman Vance calls attention to in the overall context of Irish literature, namely the writer's mediation between two communities: "a community of origin and the larger community which supplies the audience for his work."⁵⁴ This is more emphatically present in the case of Northern Irish authors as a result of their specific cultural context, and with the advance of globalisation and its consequences, social as well as cultural, there is a markedly broader second community with an increased range of mutual influence for the poetry. In a complex process this undermines the validity of earlier essentialist concepts of identity stemming from rootedness in a particular territory with its consequent authenticity, and a part of this process is the recognition and acknowledgement of a different understanding of place as a constituent of identity: "[p]lace is increasingly viewed as the product of global, interconnecting flows of peoples, cultures and meanings – of routes rather than roots."⁵⁵

The approach to space as product, presuming also the importance of the process that results in that product, and the understanding of place as a "spatio-temporal event"⁵⁶ create a dynamic framework for the addressing of place in which interdependence and mutual influence are involved to balance the earlier concepts of fixity, solidity and self-contained definition. Observed in the context of Northern Ireland, the idea of place seen in its relation with other places⁵⁷ is now understood as part of a broader and more general post-modern condition – as Kennedy-Andrews concludes, "[p]laces are inevitably more or less hybrid, their character always influenced by relations with other places."⁵⁸ When place comes to be rendered in literary representation, this network-like characteristic of locations mobilises the category and produces at the same time a self-reflexive exploration of the relation between physical, mental and social space. In the resulting representation reality and imagination are involved in a mutually influential relation: "[...] symbolic or metaphorical representations of space are inflected and conditioned (often indirectly) by the material forces and affective qualities of the physical spaces to which they respond and refer. But equally, such mental projections of ideas and images also act upon and influence (again, indirectly) the lived experience of social space."⁵⁹ The constitutive and constructive power of social relations for place eventually destabilises the concept of home, the commonly understood ultimate spatial reference point, as well, endowing it with "polysemic

⁵³ cf. Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry*, 12-13

⁵⁴ Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History. Tradition, Identity and Difference* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 211

⁵⁵ Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry*, 2

⁵⁶ Massey, *for space*, 130

⁵⁷ cf. Hugh Haughton, " 'Even now there are places where a thought might grow': Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon." In: Neil Corcoran (ed.) *The Chosen Ground. Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), 87

⁵⁸ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968 – 2008* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 19

⁵⁹ Alexander, *Ciaran Carson. Space, Place, Writing*, 37

character”⁶⁰ and acknowledging its nature as being “produced out of the encounter with other places, languages and histories, in the process of which the opposition between home and away, self and other, rootedness and itinerancy, is inevitably revised.”⁶¹

As place becomes a dynamic concept, a shifting and mobile one, the need for some anchor for proper orientation appears all the more important. The poetry of Patrick Kavanagh as a forerunner with his claim for the significance of real, lived local experience provides an example of enquiries into the practical experience of place, but with the specific historical dimension of place and its “religious geography”⁶² Northern Ireland proposes a challenge for a simple emulation of earlier poetic practice. The peculiar situation of the province prompts poets to employ some kind of system, with a tentative bow to as well as a polemic with Yeats. As Andrews notes, John Montague and Seamus Heaney follow in the footsteps of Kavanagh in terms of their knowledge of their landscapes, yet their understanding of place differs as they “are drawn into the mystique of the tribal, the mythic and etymological, a landscape of numinous places telling of dispossession and disinheritance”,⁶³ as opposed to Kavanagh’s directly personal focus of experience, stemming partly from their different educational background which has the potential of alienating them from their communities.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Kavanagh’s work proves the legitimate claim of the local for the attention of serious poetry and for acting as a solid point of reference, exemplified by Montague’s and even more prominently by Heaney’s childhood home, with its pump in the yard identified as the “omphalos.”⁶⁵ Others, such as Michael Longley and Derek Mahon follow different paths by conducting enquiries into the nature and dynamism of the relationship observed between locations that create them as distinct ones in relative terms. In spite of differing approaches, all these poets attribute special importance to place in their poetries and each of them recognises the dynamic nature of the concept of place as they deal with it, entering into dialogue with various aspects of place as well as whole traditions centred on places such as the pastoral or the particularly Irish one of *dinnséanchas*. The influence of the English topographical or loco-descriptive poetry is also observable that stems from the specific Northern cultural context with its (post-)colonial elements which, in Brendan Kennelly’s view, results in a more complex web of

⁶⁰ Alexander, Ciaran Carson. *Space, Place, Writing*, 16

⁶¹ Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, 18

⁶² cf. A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground. Aspects of Ulster 1609 – 1969* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1977), 179-182

⁶³ Elmer Andrews, . “Introduction”. In: Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 12

⁶⁴ cf. Andrew Murphy, *Seamus Heaney*. 3rd ed. (Horndon: Northcote House Publishers, 2009), 11

⁶⁵ cf. “I would begin with the Greek word, *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door.” Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 17

formative influences, with a tentative nod to its potential benefit, since “[t]he Northern poet [...] enjoys the advantage of being both Irish and British.”⁶⁶

The common experience of all the discussed poets is that of change, the need for dialogue with the traditions involved in the approach to place, resulting in active negotiation with the respective tradition. Montague’s spatial metaphor of the landscape as manuscript connects with the lore of place, yet his admittance of the problem of accessing it due to the loss of the language requires a different methodology of entering into contact with the heritage, with the concurrent recognition of the limited understanding that it entails.⁶⁷ Heaney’s interest in local place names leads to a similar conclusion as the act of deciphering them involves specific effort for tracing the changes the current forms of the names display, with a consequent reliance on the poet’s own personal experience of the places they refer to. This is ultimately a necessary dialogue, one in which the personal precedes the learned and cultural, communal element, producing an essentially hybrid experience. Heaney also engages in a dialogue with the pastoral yet never fully gives in to its appeal due to the effect of personal experience. Montague’s attempts to return to the scene of his childhood also involve pastoral elements just to refute them due to change both in terms of the actual location and the observing speaker’s consciousness and experience. The two poets’ conclusion in this respect falls in line with John Hewitt’s disillusioned statement in his poem “Postscript, 1984”: “the whole tarnished map is stained and torn, / not to be read as pastoral again”,⁶⁸ which ultimately suggests the inadequacy of the pastoral⁶⁹ to provide an adequate frame of representation for the current situation of place, especially in the context of Northern Ireland. Longley’s keen-eyed interest in the natural world is indicative of some form of longing for permanence and stability that derives from his distrust of human constructs, which also testifies to an understanding of place as intricately related to time. Mahon’s awareness of the importance of time, including specific momentary weather conditions as reminders of a dimension beyond human control, as well as his understanding of the effect of other locations on the assessment of particular places indicate his approach to place as a highly complex one that reflects the general changes to the concept of place observable through a broad range of disciplines.

The poets addressed in the following essays are well-known and well-established literary artists from Northern Ireland. John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon all present aspects and facets of poetry from Northern Ireland that emerge from that particular social and cultural context that the province embodies, and while their poetries connect in many ways with the broader Irish tradition, they are clearly marked by the

⁶⁶ Brendan Kennelly, *Journey into Joy. Selected Prose*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), 61

⁶⁷ cf. John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1995), 33

⁶⁸ John Hewitt, *Freehold and other poems* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1986), 26

⁶⁹ a detailed assessment of the pastoral is presented in the essays “‘Yet something mourns.’ Pastoral elements in John Montague’s poetry” and “Heaney’s Glanmores – Almost Pastoral (?)”

palpable influence of that specific cultural matrix which characterises Northern Ireland. While Montague is of an earlier generation, his inclusion with the later triad of Heaney, Longley and Mahon is justified by his claim for the position of the “missing link in Ulster poetry”⁷⁰ as well as by his seminal collection addressing the situation of Northern Ireland, *The Rough Field* (1972), which was labelled as “[t]he single finest collection of Irish poetry since Yeats’s *The Tower*”,⁷¹ centred around fundamental changes that Montague observed in connection with his native province in the course of a period of increasing and intensifying civil unrest. The experience of the massive changes that eventually led to the eruption of the Troubles was a direct one for Heaney, Longley and Mahon in their formative years as emerging poets.⁷² They share the exposure to those profound changes that compelled them to address the experience of that complex matrix that Northern Ireland represented from the 1960s onwards.

The complex background of John Montague (1929-2016) forms a challenging set of influences and conditions. As the poet claimed, his heritage of diverse elements would pose a major challenge for defining an accessible identity: “Brooklyn-born, Tyrone-reared, Dublin-educated, constituted a tangle, a turmoil of contradictory allegiance it would take a lifetime to unravel”.⁷³ His Catholic family background with the figure of the Republican father choosing exile in the wake of partition renders him a representative of a particular segment of the Northern population, yet his later travels and broad international experience provide an active counterpoint to his local roots in County Tyrone, which eventually informs his approach to place as well. His reading of the landscape of his native province as a repository of history suggests the influence of the tradition of *dinnséanchas* as a subtext of solid cultural foundation and thus some form of permanence, yet the acknowledgement of change as an inevitable part of history adds a dynamic balancing element to his understanding of place as the position and attitude of the observer become actively involved in the construction of the meaning of place. His inclusion of elements of the pastoral tradition yields a similar result as the observing intelligence discovers and faces the limitations of the tradition for the representation of place in that particular context which he targets. A fundamental dimension of Montague’s poetry is the registering of change in connection with place, prompting him to favour the elegiac as a mode in his contemplation of the temporal constituent of locations, and his preference for short lines creates a sense of tension as a result of the narrow space the form allows for.

The position of Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) as the leading voice of his generation is well-documented. His Catholic background in a small local farm renders him as a representative of the minority in Northern Ireland, but as a

⁷⁰ Montague, *The Figure in the Cave*, 9

⁷¹ Rory Brennan, “Contemporary Irish Poetry: an Overview.” In: Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1995), 3

⁷² cf. Heaney, “Place and Displacement”, 162

⁷³ Montague, *The Figure in the Cave*, 8

beneficiary of the 1947 Butler Education Act he had access to secondary and later tertiary level education, opening the possibility of a different life from that of his forebears. Heaney's poetry was strongly anchored to specific places from the outset, with a strong regional affiliation⁷⁴, conducting enquiries into various aspects of his environment, with an increasingly explicit tribal element that would also open up the category of place for him. His concerns with place validate the claim of the poet as geographer,⁷⁵ and his examination of the heritage preserved in place names as well as his dialogue with the pastoral reflect his understanding of space as product and place as a complex of spatial and temporal constituents. By employing different approaches and tactics in handling place he also demonstrates a strong sense of self-reflection which becomes especially apparent when he returns to specific places in different contexts in different phases of his career. In addition to the importance of place in his own poetic practice, several of his essays deal with the concept both in general and in the particular context of poets, reflecting a life-long concern with the category and a willingness for reassessment in connection with it. The generic and formal variety of his poems that address place also indicate this openness to the concept of place.

Michael Longley (1939-2025) hailed from a Protestant urban context, and as a child of English parents living in Belfast his background represents a different experience. As a Belfast resident, his sense of home appears solid, yet his act of establishing a home from home in the West of Ireland testifies to his understanding of the interrelation of places, with a special emphasis on their mutual role in their definition. In Longley's poetry the observing speaker receives a major role in setting up and defining the relative position of places as well as in intimating the possibility of discovery and surprise in the process of contemplation. This openness is coupled with a preference for measured and disciplined forms in his poetry, which creates an intriguing dynamic relationship between speaker and utterance and results in a specific lyric voice.

Derek Mahon (1941-2020) shares a Belfast Protestant background with Longley, although Mahon's working-class family configuration and his suburban affiliation mark some differences from the experience of the other poet. Mahon's ambivalent relation to his community is also well-documented as several poems express his uneasiness with the specific Protestant tradition that he comes from. This sceptical position coupled with his broad range of international experience results in his peculiar sense of place: he demonstrates the most apparent awareness of the dynamic nature of places, of the network or matrix of relationships between and among places as constitutive of their respective understanding. Several of his poems are built on the premise of the active relation between different places for their respective definition and description, and it is in his poetry that the notion of places as spatio-temporal events is demonstrated in the most salient way. Mahon's impressive formal

⁷⁴ cf. Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 1-15

⁷⁵ cf. Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 65

variety and control of his medium reflect his attempt for order in the shifting matrix of relationships that place involves.

The fact that Seamus Heaney addressed the category of place in essays besides his poetry indicates the practical importance and at the same time the complexity of the concept in the Northern Irish context. An assessment of his prose reflections on the meaning of place in poetry and its relation to his own poetic practice constitutes the subject of the first essay, serving as the starting point for the exploration of the concept in a broader field. Heaney's secure sense of his grounding in a particular spatial and at once social context provides him with an anchor which is at the same time a safe point of reference for the exploration of other aspects of those places and subsequently of other places as well. Heaney's reflections on places are constructed out of lived as well as learned experiences, and the dynamic relationship between these two shaping forces runs through his entire oeuvre with the use of characteristic motifs that recur, as indicated by the poems selected for analysis.

The examination of the approaches to place of Derek Mahon and of Michael Longley follow in respective essays. Despite their similar urban and Protestant background, there is a marked difference between Mahon's and Longley's positions. Mahon's declaredly less assured stance in relation to his own community and its spatial foundations shows a substantial contrast with Longley's safe sense of his place reflected in his concepts of the well-defined spatial context of home and home from home. The speakers of Mahon's poems of his early and middle phases⁷⁶ are characterised by an aloof position, they contemplate places in specific moments and conditions in which they retain their distance from the observed phenomena without their causal involvement in what surrounds them. Longley's observing speaker recognises and acknowledges the malleability of the impression of places as he constructs his vision of the western cottage of Carrigskeewaun in the course of repeated visits that represent a continuous concern throughout Longley's whole oeuvre. The image of the cottage, a country retreat located far, in all senses, from the Belfast home of the poet, also invites the involvement of the pastoral in his poetry, yet Longley's focus does not ultimately coincide with that particular tradition.

The pastoral tradition and its presence is the subject of the essays that follow the piece on Longley's poetry. John Montague's poetry contains elements from the pastoral tradition as part of his reflections on locations revisited in journeys that target later returns to his native place dealt with in two of his major volumes, *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom*. The omnipresence of change, however, compels the poet to reconsider the adequacy and eventually the capability of the pastoral to address the differences observed in that particular mode of discourse. Heaney's poems focusing on the Glanmore cottage, permanent residence at first, rural escape later, also involve the pastoral in the assessment of the place, and in a characteristically Heaney-esque manner

⁷⁶ There is a marked shift observable in the position of Mahon's speakers in his later poetry that leads to a different focus for his poems, adding a strong ecocritical element to those late poems, which is not dealt with here.

there is an objective critical position employed in his reflections on the experience as well as on the discourse used for reflection. Heaney's treatment of the Glanmore motif shows a sensitive and subtly altering dialogue with the pastoral as his repeated returns to the location present him with new insights and perspectives on each occasion, encompassing various phases of his poetic career.

The motif of the cottage as a rural escape, a type of retreat, introduces the element of the use of another location from which to examine the targeted place, and this act of relativizing the perspective to uncover aspects of a location with the help of another vantage point is explored in the essay on Mahon's concept of "elsewhere" frequently employed in the poems of his early and middle phases⁷⁷. Mahon's use of the perspective of another location when addressing a particular place suggests his understanding of the complexity of places and the acknowledgement of their interconnectedness for definition and description. This recognition leads to the mobilisation of the observing position, implying the motif of the journey, real or imaginary, and the importance of the act of crossing along the way of borders, in turn real or arbitrarily drawn, between the point of departure and that of the hoped for arrival. This motif is explored in detail in John Montague's volume *The Dead Kingdom* in the final essay of the collection. Montague's explicit concern with the act of crossing opens up the category of place towards an even broader metaphysical dimension by virtue of its inevitable entanglement with time. In this process place is seen explicitly determined by time and becomes a malleable and shifting concept that is never fully observed from an external position but is constructed by the contemplating and simultaneously participating, because located, consciousness. This act eventually leads to the reassessment of the concept of the border as well, with implications specific to the Northern Irish context and its multifarious divisions. Montague's understanding of the intricate interrelation of personal and communal history, stemming from his own experience, carries the potential of projecting the tentative possibility of finding a means of moving beyond those divisions on the analogy of his own personal reconciliation with his traumatic heritage.

The treatment of place in poetry from Northern Ireland is regularly seen as closely related to questions of identity as a result of the "fractured geographical communities"⁷⁸ of the province. As demonstrated above, place is not an innocent and uncontested constant in the context of human experience, consequently approaches to place reflect social conditions that are seen as traditionally patterned, culturally and historically determined and/or influenced. Identity discourses in literary criticism, however, offer the temptation, and therefore pitfalls, of directing attention away from the poetry and thus reflect on other considerations that have little to do with the actual texts criticism is

⁷⁷ In a similar manner to the other piece, Mahon's later poems are not considered in this essay due to their shift of perspective and emphasis on an ecocritically responsible position.

⁷⁸ Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History. Tradition, Identity and Difference*, 211

supposed to address as its principal concern.⁷⁹ Although the tracing of historical and political elements affecting identity represents a more apparently determinist and generalising critical principle that tends towards an alignment of poetic practice with the established patterns of social division in Northern Ireland,⁸⁰ place is not an altogether neutral category from this particular aspect either as the social foundations of its understanding indicate. Nevertheless, the traps of substituting identity discourses for reading poems can be avoided by due attention paid to the poems themselves instead of asking them to conform to prefabricated patterns and positions determined by preferred critical agenda or culturally or politically induced ideas and ideologies. While Edward Said rightly insists on the idea that “texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted”,⁸¹ the act of reading that social world as a text allows the poet to engage with or refuse to comply with explicit notions of allegiance and thereby forge their own concept of place which, as a result, can prioritise aesthetic considerations instead of socio-cultural expectations formulated in advance. The poets discussed provide different illustrations of this. Montague’s recognition of the failure to reconnect with places from his childhood is a tacit admittance of the invalidity of cultural determiners presumed to be relevant and effective in the face of the richness of personal experience. Heaney’s experiments with various traditions, his revision of those very traditions and subsequent preference for personal empirical experience of places indicate a similar path of aesthetic liberation. Longley’s home from home in the West is a deliberate move beyond expected affiliative attitudes, and Mahon’s various places observed from a measured perspective also strive to keep distance from limiting socio-cultural, historical or political expectations with their prescriptive agendas.

Heaney’s observation on the experience of the Northern Irish population of simultaneously living in two places at once is a more complex idea with a farther reaching scope than its casually elegant rhetoric would imply at first glance. The bifurcated situation of living in the actual present and in some mental construct at the same time does not only insist on the importance of place but calls its absolute position into question by the same token. The experience of place per se, as a given spatial context, is something to investigate and open up for experimental assessment, rather than to be comfortably taken for granted as an uncontested constant. The immediate physical reality of place is neither desirable nor possible to dismiss since it constitutes the world of the actual present, yet the experience of that is assessed through the mediating presence and assistance of the mental place, and it is the dynamic

⁷⁹ cf. Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities. Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1-19

⁸⁰ cf. Gail McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 29-35

⁸¹ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4

relationship between the two that shapes the representation of place in the poetry. Heaney defends the necessary presence of that mental other by insisting on its role as an aesthetic principle and not a tactics of evading the actual as he also acknowledges the political status of the poet.⁸² His position shows an understanding of place as being a highly important part of that complex matrix that Northern Ireland represents, and there is the awareness of the complexity of the concept of place itself with its spatial and temporal constituents. This complexity requires an approach that is capable of demonstrating a sufficient degree of openness and flexibility for addressing it in addition to a strong sense of a referential framework that marks the field in which that addressing and assessment are played out. This leads to active dialogue with established traditions, involving the revision, refining, readjustment or eventual rejection of those traditions as the interaction between those two senses of location is explored. Just as poetry itself requires the simultaneous presence and interaction of the principles of discipline and flexibility, place in poetry is also examined, assessed and represented in the active and dynamic relationship of these two principles.

⁸² cf. Heaney, "Place and Displacement", 163-164

Seamus Heaney's Sense of Place

Seamus Heaney opens his essay "The Sense of Place" with the following assertion: "I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious."¹ While Heaney's principal point to illustrate in the essay is the way how place provides a point of orientation for a selected number of poets he feels affinity with, his position is general enough to attribute an essentially personal frame of reference for the experience of the category of place. Although the broader and more abstract term to cover the dimension he addresses would be "space", Heaney uses the term "place" to address the spatial aspect of the work of the respective poets, suggesting a more particular approach to the object of his inquiry. Heaney's reading of his poets of choice aligns with the usual critical practice that sees place as an important element of Irish poetry, a definitive aspect that marks Irish poetry as a distinctive set within poetry written in English. By suggesting that the poets he reads gain a strong point of reference from their places, he also offers an implicit insight into his own poetic allegiances and convictions both in terms of the importance of the spatial element for his poetry and its more general position in human experience.

The relation of space and place, according to Yi-Fu Tuan, is a complex one that is essentially centred around the meaning attributed to and value bestowed on the practical scope of the respective terms. Though he claims that the meanings of the two terms often merge in experience, he indicates a conceptual difference opening between them: "[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."² It follows from this that "[f]rom the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa."³ Approached in this way, place is comprehended, interpreted and humanised space whose understanding is a function of the interpretational framework imposed on it by human intelligence. This attributes a major role in the understanding of place to the observer and consequently allows for various possible readings of the same place by different persons, both simultaneously and at different

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-78*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1980), 131

² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6

³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6

points in time. Place thus appears not an essentially static category, a simple background to experience, but a dynamic one which is in a constant dialogue with its human observer, and that observing position is all the more significant as it is located within that particular place, forming a part of it, either on a permanent basis or for the limited duration of observation.

According to John Agnew, place as “meaningful location” is characterised by the three aspects of location, locale and sense of place.⁴ While location is the simple spatial definition of a place, locale is already more closely related to human presence since it is “the material setting for social relations – the actual shape of place within which people conduct their lives as individuals.”⁵ However, it is the third element, sense of place, that provides the thoroughly human aspect of place to complement the previous two items – sense of place “means the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place.”⁶ While this is challenged by the process of globalisation, especially by its homogenising effect,⁷ it is still a major aspect that informs individual understanding of places. Literary renderings of places stem principally from this aspect as they represent the personal experience of this category, therefore they express exactly that subjective and emotional attachment that is identified as sense of place. Heaney’s choice of title for his essay reflects this conviction, and his use of the term falls in line with this strand of theoretical discussion concerning the relation of space and place.

While the essay begins with the idea of the two ways of knowing a place quoted above, Heaney broadens his interpretive horizon by incorporating further cultural layers into the understanding of place which possess a special importance in the Irish literary tradition. The link between original Irish place names and history, real as well as legendary, manifests in the tradition of the *dinnséanchas*. By metonymic transfer the act of encoding is extended implicitly to the landscape, the tangible physical referent of place names, thus the Irish landscape is eventually a repository of “the underlay of Gaelic legend”.⁸ This layer, however, is only available through the effort of learning due to the decline of the language and the colonial act of the early 19th century Ordnance Survey which renamed the Irish countryside in its entirety, leading to the fading and nearly complete loss of the cultural subtext of place names. As a result, the experience of place appeals principally to the “aesthetic eye” and remains little more than “a visual pleasure”.⁹ As a consequence of Yeats’s inscription of certain places into his poetry, however, there is another experience of place which can illustrate the fusion of culture and landscape. Although this differs from the communal scope of the earlier legendary due to its personal origin and reference, its mechanism operates in an analogous

⁴ Tim Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 7

⁵ Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction*, 7

⁶ Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction*, 7

⁷ cf. Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction*, 8

⁸ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 132

⁹ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 132

manner for a “marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind.”¹⁰ It is this relationship that Heaney finds the central element of the experience of place and its expression in poetry.

Heaney's own poetry is generally seen as strongly grounded in place, especially due to his early poems that are deeply rooted in his experience of the environment of the family farm. References to places are present throughout his poetry although his poem titles include such spatial elements on a much less frequent basis than they can be found in the poetry of his contemporaries Michael Longley or Derek Mahon. While some titles explicitly name locations, offering clearly defined and delineated places, there are several instances in which the evoked locations are generic rather than specific. Such places are introduced with features that tend to be indicative of certain phenomena rather than being characterised by concrete and specific details of the given location, and such places tend to remain unnamed beyond their rather general geographical marker that merely provides a broad orientation for the type of place that is evoked in the text of the poem.

Mossbawn is the setting of several of Heaney's poems, especially the early ones, due to its function as the formative environment of his childhood. Despite its underlying presence, there is little description of the place itself in traditional terms – what is presented is more of a metonymic relation between the described events and routines and the place, which suggests the unconscious and lived experience of place rather than the learned one when assessed against the two ways Heaney outlines at the beginning of his essay. Although the connection between the speaker of the poems dealing with the experience of the place and the place itself is subtle and deep, Heaney does not attempt to create a conventional pastoral impression of the country location and his vision is not altered by affection towards the place stemming from its significance as the family home. Heaney's interpretation retains a balance between the pastoral potential of the place and its actual features that include the hardships which characterise agricultural realities, and there are several instances in which the latter outweigh the former. The experience is subjected to reflection but the speaker's point of view preserves its essentially naïve position that does not process the tackled information in a sophisticated interpretive framework informed by learning.

The name Mossbawn only appears explicitly in one poem title and even that is symbolically situated: the dedicatory opening poems of the volume *North* create what Michael Parker terms “a past perfected, a tangible world of warmth, solidarity and almost mellow fruitfulness.”¹¹ As the collection was written in another well-documented location of Heaney's life, the isolated cottage of Glanmore, the dedicatory poems imply an intention of linking the current location with a pastoral-like evocation of a golden age of a Northern elsewhere that sharply contrasts both with the actualities of the Troubles and

¹⁰ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 132

¹¹ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 126

Heaney's attempt of framing it in a broadly encompassing mythic halo that could offer, if not an explanation, but a tentative interpretational ground for the violent present. As a result, the dedicatory poems reflect a readjusted image of the family farm, one that dispenses with those earlier highlighted elements that depicted the reality of farm life without idealisation, and the resulting new representation restores a more explicit pastoral potential to the place in retrospect. In this way the recalled and subsequently reconsidered and reassessed world of the family home appears to reflect the evolution of the poet's focus of attention and understanding in the form of a revised sense of experience, that of the travelled adult spectator forging a rekindled sense of affection in place of his earlier objectivity. The pattern of representation, however, remains the same as in the earlier poems as the place is evoked through a limited set of phenomena and ritual-like actions rather than proper descriptive details, suggesting the same approach in terms of sense of place as in his previous accounts of Mossbawn life.

Glanmore is approached in a more complex way as there is an explicitly self-conscious element in linking it to literary precedents. Heaney's residence in the cottage evokes parallels with his rural upbringing but it also highlights the difference of the experience as the adult poet is compelled to face a different set of responsibilities in that environment. The echoes of the poet's childhood world are deliberately recalled to function as potential points of reference to assess the new experience but the adult's reflective approach results in a less spontaneous effect in his sense of the place. Moreover, his inclusion of literary references suggests a wish to affiliate his experience with a broader learned tradition, which points towards the second way of knowing and cherishing a place that he outlines in the essay. All the Glanmore poems represent a carefully contemplated and strongly allusive response to the place that originates partly from the time of the composition of the poems: the "Glanmore Sonnets" in *Field Work* were written when the poet was already a Dublin resident after his spell in Glanmore, whereas the sequence "Glanmore Revisited" in *Seeing Things* was composed when the poet acquired the cottage as his own property for the purpose of a holiday home, an occasion that fostered reflection on his earlier experience of the place in the light of his altered relation to it. With this approach, Heaney's Glanmore becomes a literary construct that arises out of a "learned, literary and conscious"¹² relation with the contemplated location.¹³

The place name poems of the volume *Wintering Out* employ the names of the locations in question in their titles and thus suggest direct concern with place. While the places are thus explicitly marked, these poems focus principally on the names themselves and seem to detach them from the respective locations, consequently the places referred to do not become properly presented ones. Although "Anahorish", "Toome" and "Broagh" contain some items that belong

¹² Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 131

¹³ the essay "Heaney's Glanmores – Almost Pastoral (?)" provides a detailed assessment of the Glanmore motif in Heaney's poetry

to the evoked places, their identity is communicated through their names, and the places are thus seen in a personal perspective that is more culturally oriented than spatially defined. The names are examined for their sound and their communal significance as mediators of a history that is partly private, through the speaker's presentation of his own relation to them, and partly shared and public, as they serve to bind the locals into a privileged community of possessors of that heritage which is preserved in the names. As a result, they do not reflect the speaker's general sense of place in a methodical manner, unlike the poems dealing with Mossbawn or Glanmore, and the poems remain exercises of cultural repossession in which the chosen places become vehicles for the act by virtue of their names. "Anahorish" serves as an illustration of how this individual process of initiation into the tradition unfolds, beginning with the personal experience of the location to the uncovering of the legendary subtext of the name as the speaker learns its original meaning, and how that eventually alters his evocation of the place as a repossessed cultural item.

Heaney returns to some of these places in later poems with an altered focus, which offers complementation to the image of the respective places by more specified elements, temporal as well as spatial. "Toome" has later companions that situate the poem and its referent in a broader and thus shifting context as the later poems provide details that reveal more about the place itself than the appeal of its name for the speaker. The poem "The Toome Road" recalls a not unusual Troubles scene of camouflaged army vehicles passing in convoy interpreted by the speaker as a violent intrusion into the normal course of life of the peaceful countryside. The presumed peace of the early morning scene is disrupted by the arrival of the military convoy, and the speaker's decision to open his account of the episode by a picture of the soldiers highlights their alien status in what would normally look like an idyllic location. Although the subsequent description of the countryside is composed of details that suggest the traditional world of rural peace, the opening image of the intruders denies the possibility of realising the potentially peaceful image of the location, and the poem remains determined by the sense of tension resulting from the clash of the local and the invader. As Michael Parker notes, the poem approximates the sonnet form yet its internal tension does not allow for the neat organisation required by the form and is thus manipulated to include the speaker's expression of defiance¹⁴ which is expressed on the conceptual as well as the formal level. The extra three lines that are added to the end of the poem finally focus on the image of the omphalos which indicates a fusion of the two ways of knowing the place: the lived one stems from the speaker's being situated in the place, whereas the learned one arises from the link with the literary tradition manifesting in the use of the phrase in that particular context.

A marked shift can be observed in the poem "At Toomebridge" as Heaney revisits the place for the opening of the volume *Electric Light*. Although Ruben

¹⁴ cf. Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 158-159

Moi refers to the poem as a “poetic parasite on Nationalist grounds, historical events and Heaney’s own poetry”¹⁵, there is a more profound facet of the poem that clarifies the speaker’s relation with the place focused on. The title already demarcates a clearly identified location, reflecting precise and accurate positioning, and the descriptive details include spatial as well as temporal elements, which suggests a profound familiarity with the place as well as hints at the combination of space and time in the concept of place.¹⁶ The speaker uses past tenses for the descriptions, for the geographical fact of the water of the lake draining off through the river as well as for the historical elements mentioned; the present tense is used to describe only the intangible potential of the place to provide inspiration. The poem concludes with an explicit shift in the poetic sensibility of the speaker as the former lure of the eel of Lough Neagh as inspiration is replaced by another aspect of the place, the “negative ions in the open air.”¹⁷ This, however, is not without ambiguity as the open air is more loosely associated with any particular place and it points beyond the historical dimension that is suggested by the use of the past tense. This shift is eventually all the more significant if all three poems are considered as it indicates a full itinerary from the human element of the name of the place through the actual physical experience of the location to the nearly mystical experience the negative ions imply.

Anahorish is another location which recurs in a later poem with a different focus and a reconsidered context. In “Anahorish” it is the name that holds the attention of the speaker, the etymology and the personal meaning of the name are explored, and the place is evoked rather than described through a rather small number of details that could actually represent any country location. In the poem “Anahorish 1944” the temporal marker shifts the attention from the potential focus carried by the place name in the title, and the poem presents more of a tableau than a description of the place. The scene, however, suggests a complementary image to the place as actual location as the rudimentary sketch of the landscape is populated by a group of locals watching soldiers passing through the land on their way to Normandy. There is a tangible sense of awkwardness created by the reversal of the situation as the local inhabitants come from pig slaughter and the soldiers are the travelling witnesses: in the poem it is the quiet countryside which functions as the scene of violence and the locals are the killers, whereas the soldiers represent order and discipline as they are marching through the area from which they remain essentially detached. There is a delicately juxtaposed image of “sunlight and gutter blood”,¹⁸ and although the latter is the marker of bloodshed of a different kind, as the speaker focuses on the familiar exercise of the local scene

¹⁵ Ruben Moi, “‘The cure by poetry that cannot be coerced’: Text, Canon and Context in Seamus Heaney’s *Electric Light*”. In: Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall (eds.) *Seamus Heaney. Poet, Critic, Translator* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 174

¹⁶ places as “spatio-temporal events”, cf. Doreen Massey, *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), 130

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), 3

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 7

and expresses his ignorance of the destination of the soldiers, the broader historical dimension of the war is only an unseen elsewhere that would be understood later in hindsight. The image of the passing soldiers tossing “gum and tubes of coloured sweets”¹⁹ to the locals, however, retains its ambiguous nature as the generosity of the soldiers can be seen as a genuine trait as well as an indication of their ultimate resignation in the face of what awaits them in the war. The ambiguity is further emphasised by the typography of the poem as the whole text is printed between quotation marks, which suggests a reported piece – yet the identity of the speaker remains undisclosed in the poem. While the past tense used for the narration indicates a recalled image of the episode, its time is not specified either, which leaves the temporal gap between the recalled scene and its retelling undetermined and consequently irrelevant since it is the episode itself whose nature is scrutinised. The manner of the account, however, reflects a delicate shift in terms of the relation with the place as the inclusion of the name in the title of the poem with the temporal marker contains an allusion to Heaney's own earlier act of introducing Anahorish into the learned and literate tradition that can affect the reader's way of knowing and cherishing place.

The concept of sense of place does not extend only to named locations since several of Heaney's poems evoke particular places without naming them with explicit precision. One such unnamed type of place is the bog, the setting of several Heaney poems in the volumes *Wintering Out* and *North*. While Heaney's interest in the bog is eventually archaeologically, and in turn anthropologically, informed, his fascination with the geographic and geologic aspects of the bog preceded his later focus on the figures found in the bog. The early poem “Bogland”, which tentatively establishes the bog as the Irish analogy of the American prairie as a spatial foundation of community, defines the bog as a complex of layers not only of space but of time as well in its vertical structure. What appears spatially identical, apart from the layers being superimposed on one another in a seemingly endless sequence, shows a temporal difference when explored by excavation and extraction, which turns the bog into a repository of a rich historical heritage as well as an intriguing type of landscape. The bog is space as process per se with the paradox of constant change underlying apparent stability, pivoting on the word “ground”:

The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.²⁰

¹⁹ Heaney, *District and Circle*, 7

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber, 1969), 55

The exploration of the bog is thus a likewise temporal mission with the uncovered elements providing a near-mystical result:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.²¹

The realisation of the repeated discovery of an earlier layer immediately below the currently explored one coupled with the constantly evolving nature of the bog eventually fuses the two ways of approaching place since the experience of the physical exercise of uncovering is complemented by the recognition of the historical and cultural heritage of the uncovered site.

Heaney's poems dealing with the bog bodies preserve this understanding of the bog and build on its implicit presence as the spatial context of his motif. As the bog poems focus on the underlying mythic element the discovered bodies uncover, the location itself is less prominent as an explicit presence in the texts. In the final piece of the sequence of the bog poems, entitled "Kinship", in the volume *North*, however, there is close attention paid to the place with its directly experienced features: Heaney's speaker explores the bog as actual location, connecting his sensory experience with a broad range of cultural aspects associated with the bog, which eventually testifies to the simultaneous and essentially complementary presence of both the instinctive and the learned understanding of place.²²

A number of unnamed locations involve the coast and employ a broadly generic approach that provides descriptive items which appear ubiquitous rather than definitive of a particular identifiable place. The frontier-like nature of the coast marks a zone of continuous interaction between land and water, each relying on proper definition for the other, and this marginally positioned dynamic environment of constant conflict and change facilitates vision or revelation as a result. Daniel Tobin calls attention to Heaney's frequent use of the "solitary driver" image in several poems linked to specific places,²³ yet perhaps this is more accurately understood as a solitary observer figure, either a driver or a pedestrian, who is placed in such locations to experience what the place imprints on him.

The experience presented in the poem "The Peninsula" is set in such a situation with a solitary observing character in a coastal setting. The place itself is

²¹ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 55-56

²² for aspects of Heaney's treatment of the bog motif see Péter Dolmányos, "Present Buried in the Past. The Bog Poems of Seamus Heaney." *The Anachronist* 2001. pp. 120-143

²³ Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center. Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 45

unspecified beyond its designation as a peninsula, and the lack of descriptive details suggests the importance of its generic nature as a marginal location which is defined by the inseparable coexistence and interaction of its constituents. The liminal character of the coast is mirrored in the speaker's idea of a state of transition: "you will not arrive // But pass through",²⁴ which is a reflection of the coastal process of the constant movement of the water in spite of its apparently stationary position in relation to the land and the very idea of the coast itself, being a constantly shifting zone rather than a clear line of demarcation. There is a precondition for the experience: it is to be undertaken "[w]hen you have nothing more to say",²⁵ which suggests the need for a broad range of sensory apparatus to be employed but the exclusion of language, targeting the experience proper, requiring pure reception. The time frame is also defined: a full day is the appropriate duration to observe the landscape in its entirety, so that the experience can encompass both space and time in the required manner to fully realise the sense of place. While the duration is a whole day, two specific parts of the day are explicitly mentioned: dusk transforms the sight, whereas darkness requires the observer to recall what has been seen. This suggests the necessity of a likewise liminal temporal element for the vision to work since dusk represents the transition between light and darkness, and the arrival of darkness compels the retrieval of a mental imprint of the formerly contemplated sight, which is eventually a transformed and transposed experience, thus eventually a product of the observer's mind.

The conclusion of the poem offers a quasi-Wordsworthian benefit of the experience as a code for reading landscapes. The basis of this reading of the experience is the essentially self-defining nature of the observed details understood as pure phenomena, "things founded clean on their own shapes"²⁶ which is beyond words. This, however, involves the ambiguity of the comprehension of the recollected experience as the act of dispensing with words suggests the suspension of the colouring of the imagination for the presentation of that experience, and even before that the dismissal of language calls into question the translation of the sight into comprehensible intellectual terms. If the repeated insistence of the speaker on having "nothing to say"²⁷ is considered as the lived and unconscious way of knowing a place, the potential of the experience to enable the observer to "uncode all landscapes"²⁸ reflects the learned and conscious way, thus the poem apparently fuses Heaney's two categories. This fusion, however, retains an ambiguous element if the requirement of leaving words, that is, language, out of the response to the experience while facing it is accepted, thus the question of the meaning of the sight remains unresolved since it is not made clear whether that meaning is discovered or constructed.

²⁴ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 21

²⁵ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 21

²⁶ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 21

²⁷ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 21

²⁸ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 21

The poem “Shoreline”, of the same collection, takes a closer look at the visibly dynamic geographical frontier zone of land and water where change is observable on an easily comprehensible human time scale. The use of the precise technical term in the title to denote the phenomenon implies a more formal and objective perspective, and consequently a generic rather than a specific individual experience. The non-finite verb forms of the opening of the poem support this direction, the speaker appears to use a common voice and tone that do not reflect a personal point of view for one particular experience. The images of corner and hill, items that constrain sight by their physical essence, serve to postpone the moment of focusing on the shoreline itself, it is the act of passing them that facilitates the vision, or at least sight, of the constant dynamic relation that exists between land and water. Co. Down is the initially depicted location, and while still rather general as a designation, it is a more particular marker of place than what the title presents. The perspective is widened to include Antrim, Moher, Wicklow and Mayo, locations that are only recalled and evoked from the position of the opening one which eventually functions as the place from where the utterance of the poem springs. The shoreline thus becomes an all-encompassing definitive element of Ireland regardless of its exact section of concrete momentary observation. Parallel to this widening of the image of the shoreline the sea is also observed in a uniform action all over the island, its constant conflict with the land is presented as a ubiquitous feature whatever type of shoreline is involved, not only the erosional scene of deep-water shorelines but even the shallow-water sections, scenes of deposition, are seen as giving in to the power of the sea in the form of “hissing submissions”.²⁹

The constant interaction between water and land is presented through the images of the waves and the tide, two general movements of seawater. While they both have their figurative potential as images, it is the sounds that the speaker focuses on, and it is this feature that activates his historical associations: the sound of the constant movement of the sea carries the menace of invasion by covering the sound of the arrival of enemies. With this closure there is a clear shift towards the learned and conscious sense of observing place as the shoreline becomes a historically loaded location – the initial account of the observation of geographical phenomena finally “uncovers the path of historical consciousness”.³⁰ This culturally and historically embedded complex experience reflects a more conscious engagement with the place than a simple act of contemplation, which is already hinted at by the implications of the use of the technical term in the title of the poem.

The activation of the same historical consciousness underlies the poem “North”, which turns it into the programmatic poem of the eponymous collection through its explicit focus on the association of the title with the Vikings. The principal concern of the poem is the search for a pillar in Heaney’s

²⁹ Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, 51

³⁰ Tobin, *Passage to the Center*, 64

attempt of lending a specifically northern mythic framework to his exploration of his conflict-ridden contemporary world of Northern Ireland, but the opening of the poem marks a location in which the speaker positions himself for his proposed evocation of the Viking world. While the presented details of that location are so generic as to question the actual position of the speaker, the bared down physicality of the place suggests its reality as the spatial frame for the experience of the speaker. The imaginative appeal of the coastal place is rejected at first as the speaker admits that on his return he “found only the secular / powers of the Atlantic thundering”³¹, and the more distant locations associated with the Vikings do not appear inspiring either as “the unmagical / invitations of Iceland”³² and the “pathetic colonies / of Greenland”³³ indicate a similar picture to the one that opens the poem, of places recalled in their pure physical geographical conditions uncoloured by cultural conceptions. This suggests the dominance of lived experience for approaching the concept of place, yet the underlying intention of conjuring the vision of “those fabulous raiders”³⁴ eventually promotes the appeal of the literate and conscious element for appreciating the place as the “epiphany”³⁵ unfolds. The vision, however, retains the sombre nature that its place of evocation shows, which suggests a close relation between the location and the vision as the one apparently affects the other. This provides an intriguing aspect of Heaney's sense of place since the poem does not make the direction of that influence clear, though the word “hindsight” used in connection with the assessment of the Viking world suggests the primacy of the place as the determining factor in this context.

The shore recovers its own appeal as location per se in the poem “Postscript”, the closing piece of *The Spirit Level*. Similarly to “The Peninsula”, this poem also suggests a drive to a coastal area, yet the conditions required for it are markedly different. Whereas in the earlier poem the location was only termed “the peninsula” and the duration of the visit was specified, in “Postscript” there is a sufficiently precise delineation of the destination and a likewise definite temporal dimension with some specific weather conditions that are seen as the proper setting in which the anticipated experience can unfold. There is also a shift in perspective as the normal border-like position of the shore is changed, the land is placed between the ocean and a lake with the spectator caught between the two water bodies in his position of observation. The two water bodies, however, represent two distinct worlds: “the ocean on one side is wild / With foam and glitter”,³⁶ an apparently hostile environment devoid of any sign of life, whereas the surface of the lake “is lit / By the

³¹ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), 10

³² Heaney, *North*, 10

³³ Heaney, *North*, 10

³⁴ Heaney, *North*, 10

³⁵ Heaney, *North*, 10

³⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), 70

earthed lightning of a flock of swans”.³⁷ Unlike the earlier coastal locations this one shows the presence of life in the landscape, and the inclusion of the swans in the image opens the possibility of allusions to Yeats, with the corresponding learned and literate form of cherishing the place.

The experience, however, remains elusive in its entirety in the speaker’s opinion. The in-between spatial placement of the observer, in terms of the position of the land as well as in his act of driving through the site, is at once an indication of a transitory situation: “[u]seless to think you’ll park and capture it / More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there”.³⁸ This highlights the importance of the temporal element in the scene and the detached position of the observer, physically distanced from the contemplated scene as a driver enclosed within the private space of his car, in spite of his location in that piece of land between the water bodies. The effect of the scene, however, involves the observer despite this apparent separation since his immediate private closed system of the car is subject to forces in the environment where it is placed, which eventually affects the observer himself, too, “[a]s big soft buffetings come at the car sideways / And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.”³⁹ The outside effect of the wind thus penetrates into the seemingly sheltered private world of the observer, almost in the form of a microcosmic parallel, which brings about a close direct experience of the place in that particular set of conditions. Yet just as the experience itself is elusive, the response of the observer remains unspecified, too: the image of the open heart can suggest vulnerability and unpreparedness as well as the possibility of receiving new experience or of disclosing its own content. Nevertheless, the potential of the scene facilitates the possibility of openness, of uncovering, and in the final analysis, of self-exploration that the suggested openness implies,⁴⁰ which aligns the poem with Heaney’s early focus on the lived experience of place.

“Nonce Words” in the volume *District and Circle* presents a different type of experience yet it is one that is inspired by the place in which it unfolds. The location is a shore which is accessed by the act of solitary driving, yet the actual place is not a specifically meditated and targeted destination; it is a site that prompts the speaker to stop on his way as a result of what appears to be a spontaneous decision. The contemplated scene is a quiet and virtually deserted winter landscape which is devoid of any other human presence, and no other lifeform is mentioned either, the gaze of the speaker finds only the frozen scenery, suggesting his presence as an outsider, almost even an intruder, in that tranquil and motionless scene. His decision to stop and park the car is not explained apart from the suggested appeal of the place, yet his initial reaction of sitting quietly in the car and recalling the word “*Requiescat*”⁴¹ suggests a rather stern and sombre assessment of the atmosphere of the outside

³⁷ Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 70

³⁸ Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 70

³⁹ Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 70

⁴⁰ cf. Tobin, *Passage to the Center*, 292

⁴¹ Heaney, *District and Circle*, 44

scenery. Nevertheless, his act of getting out of the car to appreciate the surrounding landscape indicates his recognition of his position as an observer and the arbitrariness of his finding that particular spot. The bracketed remark "a sign mistaken"⁴² suggests that the speaker ends up in the location by accident, and the speaker's admission that it is his "first stop / like this in years"⁴³ lends a greater significance to the sight that compels him to stop. The significance of the moment, its particularity in facilitating the vision requires the propensity of the observer to be open to receive it, and the speaker acknowledges the role of "nonce / and happenstance"⁴⁴ in the experience, illustrating the proper lived sense of the place.

In "Ballynahinch Lake" Heaney describes a shared experience of a visionary moment in a particular location. The usual solitary position of the speaker observing the place and receiving an enlightening experience in turn is replaced by a shared moment with a companion. The title indicates a sufficiently exact delineation of the place, complemented by its broader placing in Connemara, and there is also the temporal marker of "a Sunday morning",⁴⁵ yet the temporal element is only partly specified. The sight, however, is accurately detailed, both in terms of the stationary elements of the place and its changing features that include wildlife as well as external conditions such as light. The scene itself is recognised as vision:

[...] a captivating brightness held and opened
And the utter mountain mirrored in the lake
Entered us like a wedge knocked sweetly home
Into core timber.⁴⁶

The observation of a pair of waterbirds complements the picture, and the speaker's interpretation of their movements follows the implications of his recognition of the visionary potential of the moment as the lift-off of the birds is commented on as barely short of miraculous due to their status as "air-heavers, far heavier than the air."⁴⁷

The consequence of the vision is a change in the observers yet the full extent of that is not revealed. There is no proper description of the exact change brought about but a vague suggestion of a moment of crossing which remains ambiguous as to its duration, whether its scope is for the moment or it is a more lasting one beyond that as well. The fact of the experience of sensing some change, however, is acknowledged both by the speaker and his companion, which points to the recognition of the significance of the location in facilitating it. It is not only the consequence of the stop and the subsequent

⁴² Heaney, *District and Circle*, 44

⁴³ Heaney, *District and Circle*, 44

⁴⁴ Heaney, *District and Circle*, 44

⁴⁵ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 26

⁴⁶ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 26

⁴⁷ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 26

experience that remain only partially disclosed but the motivation for the act of stopping itself too: by starting the account of the episode with the word “so” a gap is present in the narrative from the outset, considering the function of the word to suggest summing up, consequence or explanation for previous action. The implication is that of prior knowledge of the place and concurrent expectation of its potential power for inducing such visionary moments, and the speaker’s initiative of making a stop at the place appears to be a deliberate and premeditated action with an anticipation of the eventual outcome.

While the motivation for the act of stopping at that particular location remains essentially unspecified, the intimation of that prior knowledge of the place points to the importance of personal experience for Heaney in the approach to place in general. In the case of both named and unnamed locations, the few descriptive details of the given place reflect the observer-speaker’s choice of emphasis, and although this may result in apparently generic pictures, the selected details indicate the meaning with which the place has been endowed by the observer. In this way the places retain their particularity and facilitate the observer’s realisation of his propensity for receiving the vision or insight that the place has the potential to induce. The openness of the observer to this vision is the pivotal element of Heaney’s sense of place since this allows for the reception of the experience of the chosen locations, this is what makes possible his reading of places in terms of their recognised significance.

In the essay Heaney makes a reference to and subsequently explores John Montague’s concept of the landscape as manuscript. Montague’s metaphor focuses on the inscription of history, legendary as well as actual, into the original place names, thus recalling the tradition of the *dinnséanchas*. The act of naming the territorial elements reflects the intention of possessing and controlling the items to be named, thus endowing them with value and settling them in a culturally delineated interpretive field, which corresponds to Tuan’s observation of the transformation of space into place.⁴⁸ Montague’s focus lies principally on the potentially irrecoverable loss that the shift from Irish to English or Anglicised place names caused, throwing light on the act of cultural dispossession. In contrast, Heaney’s concern with the place names shifts the emphasis towards personal experience in this respect, uncovering his own response to the subtext of what they are still capable of preserving, in terms of meaning as well as cultural bond for a community, both understood beyond, and despite, the act of the dispossession Montague focuses on. For Heaney the landscape becomes a text of a different kind, not centring on the legendary layer but not purely relying on the aesthetic eye mentioned in the essay either. Heaney’s reading of locations is always rooted in his own personal experience, in turn lived and in turn learned, on occasion with a fusion of the two perspectives, yet in all cases the given place is endowed with value that stems from his personal assessment of the location, even when drawing on cultural or historical associations for presenting the appeal of a place. In this way his

⁴⁸ cf. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6

understanding of places appears akin to Derek Mahon's idea of the "intrinsic nature" of any location that insists on the particularity of any place in its own context and for its own essence, on its own right.⁴⁹

According to Heaney the two ways of knowing a place, the lived and the learned, have a dynamic relationship, challenging and in turn reinforcing each other.⁵⁰ While several of his representations of places are rooted in the first, lived type of knowledge, their inscription into the poems alters the status of these locations for reception: in the wake of Heaney's own poetic oeuvre several of his depicted locations become encrypted into the tradition and thus promote the second, learned way of approaching place. This suggests that in his poetic practice the relationship between the two ways is complementary rather than antipathetic, although in the case of approaching certain locations such as the bay in "North" there is a tangible sense of the presence of tension between what is expected and what is eventually experienced. Such instances also imply the preconditioning potential of initial expectations brought to the act of observation, which ultimately constrains the speaker's openness to receive the experience in his own personal situation and at the same time indicates the presence and influence of broader cultural contexts in which that personal situation is always embedded. This at once points to the subtle relationship between Heaney's critical perspective reflected in the essay and his own poetic practice, indicating not only how Heaney's own writing affects his reading of others but also the influence his reading has on his own conception of approaching place. His poetic practice eventually brings the two ways of knowing a place together into one complex by fusing the speaker's often unconscious and lived experience of the place with the consequent conscious and learned experience of it for the audience, thus his places are inscribed into the tradition and reshape it in turn. The result is a dynamic matrix, a constant resituating of the poles of the lived and of the learned, for him as well as for the audience, which ultimately keeps Heaney's sense of place as vibrant and cherishable as the places themselves.

⁴⁹ Derek Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*. ed. Peter Fallon. (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2021), 128

⁵⁰ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 131

Derek Mahon's Geography of Ambiguity: Geography of the Moment

Derek Mahon's poem entitled "Brighton Beach" includes the rather disillusioning assertion "Places as such are dead / Or nearly"¹ which apparently dismisses the possibility of attaching specific significance to the concept of the "spirit of place" (Mahon 1999, 155) anticipated by the speaker. Although the context is particular, with the title of the poem defining its current focus and relevance, the statement is formulated in such a general way that it seeks to point beyond its immediate target of the faded and still fading glory of the imperial resort, and suggests the essentially objective and self-contained existence of any location and that status is only overwritten by human desire for some sort of intrinsic element that is capable of impinging on the spiritual state of the spectator. The statement is all the more unsettling if another Mahon poem, "A Garage in Co. Cork" is considered, whose last stanza attributes uniqueness to each location and insists on the importance of their "intrinsic nature"². The speaker's contemplation of the garage is driven by the motif of the place itself as well as the fact of its having been abandoned, and this dual focus involves a change in perspective as the initial detached position gives way to a more nostalgic, and therefore more involved consideration of the site through the imagined emotional significance to the unknown former inhabitants. The poem thus reflects Mahon's special relation to place in which observed details lead to conceptualisation and more abstract concerns, yet at the same time challenges what Eamonn Hughes marks as "a lack of concern with circumstantial details"³ in Mahon's approach to place. As Julia C. Obert puts it, "[f]ar from melancholically withdrawing into cerebral abstraction in the face of unbelonging, Mahon's poetry is insistently perceptual: it turns to local landscapes and intimately apprehends their phenomenal world."⁴ While Mahon is indeed not a practitioner of minutely executed detailed descriptions of locations, his places show a particular blend of spatial and circumstantial markers in which the subjective presence of the observer plays a major role as this subjective presence frequently supplies ambiguity to both place and

¹ Derek Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*. ed. Peter Fallon. (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2021), 144

² Mahon, *The Poems*, 128

³ Eamonn Hughes, "'Weird / Haecceity': Place in Derek Mahon's Poetry. In: Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.). *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), 99

⁴ Julia C. Obert, *Postcolonial Overtures. The Politics of Sound in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry* (EPUB ed. Syracuse University Press, 2015), Ch. 4, section 1, par. 3

situation resulting from the speaker's assessment of that particular context he is presenting.

The last stanza of the poem "Spring in Belfast" begins with the self-reflexive conclusion "One part of my mind must learn to know its place".⁵ The idea of being placed is involved in both senses of the broader context of community and allegiances and the more tangible geographical demarcation of origin and belonging. Whereas the former suggests a more complex web of relations and a more complicated act of self-definition, the latter implies a more easily understood and therefore simpler delineation of what is essentially a concrete place. Hugh Haughton notes Mahon's "reluctance 'to know his place' on both counts",⁶ while Elmer Andrews calls attention to the dangers of falling "prey to a too simple-minded, because uniquely generated, version of things"⁷ without the mind's proper awareness of its place, relevant in both readings of the phrase. The auxiliary "must" acts as a reminder of a self-imposed task to complete, yet the phrasing "one part of my mind" receives no particular attention from critics, albeit its cunning suggestion of a part instead of the inclusion of the whole is also worthy of consideration as it implies complexity in relation to the targeted concept and the possibility of its divided perception. This complexity indeed involves what Haughton identifies as a "larger condition"⁸ in which any place always functions as a part in Mahon's poetry, yet his observation that "Mahon anchors his utterance in locale, in named places, but insists on its mobility, its origins and destinations elsewhere"⁹ does not do full justice to the significance of the place of anchoring. As Magdalena Keys comments, "[t]he Mahonian speaker possesses an uncanny ability to dwell in literary allusion and in the imagination *while* staying grounded in a specific geographical place",¹⁰ suggesting the importance of the actual place of the speaker. While Mahon's places are often shown in the matrix of other locations, the actual ones out of which the respective utterances spring have their own decisive role to play in those utterances, as "We might be anywhere but are in one place only".¹¹ As Hughes points out, Mahon's position is neither strictly comparativist nor universalist, "the world of his poetry is one in which all locales retain an identity, it is a world in which the 'weird haecceity'¹² of all locales must

⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 19

⁶ Hugh Haughton, "'Even now there are places where a thought might grow': Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon". In: Neil Corcoran (ed.) *The Chosen Ground. Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), 95

⁷ Elmer Andrews, "The Poetry of Derek Mahon: 'places where a thought might grow'". In: Elmer Andrews (ed.) *Contemporary Irish Poetry. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 241

⁸ Haughton, "Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", 93

⁹ Haughton, "Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", 93

¹⁰ Magdalena Kay, *Knowing One's Place in Contemporary Irish and Polish Poetry. Zagajewski Mahon, Heaney, Hartwig* (London: Continuum, 2012), 89

¹¹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 128

¹² The phrase is altered to "weird facticity" in later versions of the poem "The Sea in Winter" (cf. Mahon, *The Poems*, 114)

be respected.”¹³ Mahon's stance, however, does not appear to be a constant and static one on a consistent basis but rather a shifting position in between, which consequently involves ambiguity as to the actual position between the two poles, not necessarily fixed even in the context of one single poem.

The frequent use of references to places in the titles of Mahon's poems indicates the importance of spatial orientation for the poet. The wide variety of places ranges from Irish through English and American locations to even the extreme continent of Antarctica, suggesting an overwhelmingly broad set of spatial markers and the impression of the point of view of an essentially cosmopolitan speaker. The implication of the latter led to a consideration of Mahon as a displaced person, a figure distanced even from his own place of origin;¹⁴ as Andrews claims, on the evidence of Mahon's early poetry, he is “an alien even in his own country”,¹⁵ in a similar manner to the assessment of Louis MacNeice as a “tourist in his own country.”¹⁶ Yet Mahon's own response to the latter claim indicates his general scepticism towards the validity of such assertions:

‘A tourist in his own country’, it has been said, with the implication that this is somehow discreditable. But of what sensitive person is the same not true? The phrase might stand, indeed, as an epitaph for Modern Man, beside Camus's ‘He made love and read the newspapers.’¹⁷

This comment questions eventually not only the validity of the constricting label but the very possibility of this type of categorisation and as such it provides a self-confessed orientation for Mahon's own relation to place. Justin Quinn notes Mahon's concept of “the idea of the poet as a homeless wanderer through the world”¹⁸ in the early phase of Mahon's poetry, a position that seeks to dismiss the traditional attachment to place observable in Irish poetry due to the fact that “such attachments are at best problematic, at worst sentimentalizations that prevent us from perceiving the radical homelessness of humanity.”¹⁹

Hughes's observation of Mahon's lack of concentrated attention to accurate details in description²⁰ is only partly accurate. While Mahon indeed sketches out places in only a few characteristic details, the act of selecting those details highlights the element of the subjective intelligence in the

¹³ Hughes, “Weird / Haecceity”, 103

¹⁴ cf. Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 263

¹⁵ Andrews, “The Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 240

¹⁶ Derek Mahon. “MacNeice in Ireland and England”. In: Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose, 1970-1995*. (Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1996), 25

¹⁷ Mahon. “MacNeice in Ireland and England”, 25

¹⁸ Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119

¹⁹ Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000*, 120

²⁰ cf. Hughes, “Weird / Haecceity”, 99

construction of places in his poetry. Andrews uses the term “reality subjectively encompassed”²¹ to refer to Mahon’s description of place in connection with the poem “Day Trip to Donegal”, yet the reference can be broadened to include Mahon’s treatment of place in general, as what is provided as descriptions are *his* versions of places. The importance of the temporal in his approach to places is not to be overlooked either. While locations may be outlined by spatial markers, they are always locations described in a particular moment, presenting an overall situation characterised by temporal markers as well. Places are thus seen and shown in certain moments, most often expressed by particular weather conditions, or one place is exposed in the matrix of other places yet in that case it is always the current one that is considered in more details, not the elsewhere compared to which the given place acquires the momentary significance it is given by attention and description, however scarce those descriptive details may appear. The subjective perspective Mahon employs hints at relativism in connection with the places, on occasion in terms of the spatial dimension, suggesting the importance of another place for the grasping of the significance of the contemplated one, and on occasion in terms of time, acting as a reminder of the complexity of any place of which a particular moment is capable of uncovering only a part, of comprehending places as composed of both space *and* time. Mahon’s places indeed become products as a result of these tactics of representation.

Mahon’s poetry features various landscapes as well as urban locations, both named and unnamed places. In numerous cases the images of places are presented in particular moments, often with specific weather conditions that give the hint of something new: they are shown after rain or in the morning, frequently with either rain or bright sunshine characterising the early part of day. Both these conditions have their implications as rain, through the idea of water, evokes cleansing, whereas the beginning of the day, regardless of the weather, with the dark followed by the appearance of light suggests a quotidian re-enactment of day one of the creation. These conditions represent elements beyond the control of the human mind and are only offered for observation, yet the propensity of the observing mind to grab the opportunity of noticing and contemplating them is an important feature of Mahon’s strongly autobiographical speaker. In such moments of observation “the world seems made anew”:²² places are seen in moments that give a sense of a new beginning and provide a potentially new experience, which suggests that the places themselves are not something constant but rather something likewise existing, and therefore changing, in time, similarly to the observer himself. The images of rain and sunlight do not only transform the picture of the place but they also provide a tangible and humanly comprehensible time frame for the visibly new experience, which forms an important part of Mahon’s tactics of conceptualising place – there is a simultaneous focus on the immediate and

²¹ Andrews, “The Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 240

²² Mahon, *The Poems*, 161

particular experience, the “intrinsic nature” of the location, and there is also the more abstract perspective of the observer’s interpretation of that experience in the broader context of the human situation, the “intrinsic nature” of human existence. The simultaneous focus allows for different interpretations, involving that ambiguity that Mahon’s speakers often demonstrate in their assessments of their respective locations.

The images of rain and sunlight form an integral part of Mahon’s renderings of places. The quick and often unpredictable alteration and alternation of these different atmospheric conditions stem from the changeability of the weather as a feature of the local climate, a geographical given, but their metaphoric potential is also strong as they are capable of giving a different aspect or potential to any place in a particular moment, often with the effect of surprise. This, however, is always a function of the position of the observer, both in terms of his actual physical location and his mental presence in observation. As the observer “might be anywhere” but is always “in one place only” in a given moment, there is the implication of location as choice. At the end of the poem “Glengormley” Mahon contrasts “necessity” and “choice”,²³ but he does it not without ambiguity as the two words are separated by “if” and not “and”, which allows for a possible reading of their relation as contiguity rather than opposition. The overall impression of his representation of places in most cases supports this interpretation and suggests that necessity is some form of a choice. Moreover, Mahon’s Northern Protestant background is inescapably embedded in a divided social context which is characterised by explicit spatial demarcations: in the particular context of Northern Ireland necessity and choice are forced into a close relation by inherited and enduring social patterns.²⁴ This appears to prompt Mahon’s speaker to select certain locations for contemplation, yet that choice is informed and controlled by traditions that eventually affect the observer’s stance and maintains the ambiguity that characterises Mahon’s relation to place.

Mahon’s biography shows a significant degree of congruence with the impression of the cosmopolitan speaker several of his poems reflect. Yet Quinn notes that in spite of the cosmopolitan aspirations “there is a contradictory impulse at work, which proclaims Northern Ireland, where he grew up, as a place which might perhaps be of more importance than others.”²⁵ The placing of the poem “Spring in Belfast” as the opening of his collected editions is a tacit admittance of this special positioning of Mahon’s place of origin. The inclusion of the name of Belfast in the title, however, is the only explicit reference to the place in the poem, and apart from the “kitchen houses / And echoing back streets of this desperate city”²⁶ no details are provided that would create a more than generic impression of Belfast, not even amounting to what has been suggested a list of landmarks in the wake of MacNeice and his treatment

²³ cf. Mahon, *The Poems*, 20

²⁴ cf. Haughton, “Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 87

²⁵ Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000*, 120

²⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 19

of the city.²⁷ It is rather the specific time of the poem which contributes to the creation of the sense of the place as the speaker's walk is conducted "[i]n a tide of sunlight between shower and shower".²⁸ The changeable weather is in perfect concord with the season marked in the title, and at the same time it is also a fitting image to visually support the figurative suggestion of spring, with the characteristic Mahonian ambiguity of the placing of the bright conditions between the less inviting ones of rain, ascribing a clearly marked temporality for them. The hectic weather also becomes a reflection of the speaker's status in the community which he initially declares his own but for which his engagement is self-confessedly deficient, cunningly expressed, as Peter McDonald notes, by the speaker's declaration that "I resume my old conspiracy with the wet / Stone",²⁹ which indicates that his attention is focused on the physical rather than on the social fabric of the city.³⁰ The walk and subsequent contemplation eventually culminates in a resolution-like conclusion for the necessity of addressing that relation, suggesting the effect of the place on the speaker. The poem, however, retains that ambiguity which surrounds the speaker's relation to the place as the self-imposed compulsion of affiliation with his people is drawn up as a task, yet with no guarantee of its fulfilment. This is also reflected in the changes to the title in the publication history of the poem from the initial "Poem in Belfast" through a shorter form of "In Belfast" to the dropping of the place name in the version "The Spring Vacation"³¹ before settling on the final version of "Spring in Belfast". Katherine Shields observes that the changes of the title reflect Mahon's "reluctance to adopt a fixed distance in relation to the city of his youth."³² This is also noted by Haughton when referring to Mahon's opposing stance to that of John Hewitt's concept of the necessity of the artist to have roots: "If Mahon 'belongs' to 'the desperate city' of Belfast, however, it is with desperate reluctance."³³ The final version of the poem with its eventual title, however, and its constant status as the opening poem of collected editions indicate the significance of Belfast as some point of reference, with a tacit indication of at least a partial completion of the project to learn his place.

Spring is a more potent presence in the poem "The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush" where it becomes a major aspect of the observed place in its current state. While in "Spring in Belfast" the season receives little attention in terms of external description and serves principally as a spiritual force that bears upon the speaker's conscience, it is a powerful shaper of the seaside town

²⁷ cf. Hughes, "Weird / Haecceity", 99

²⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 19

²⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 19

³⁰ cf. Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities. Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 90

³¹ cf. Kathleen Shields, "Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging". *Irish University Review*, Spring-Summer, 1994, Vol. 24, No.1., 69

³² Shields, "Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging", 69

³³ Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, (EPUB ed. Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 2, section. 3, par. 6

which transforms it not only for the speaker but for other inhabitants as well who imply by association the whole of the town. The uncharacteristic weather turns the place into a “[g]entle and almost hospitable”³⁴ one, marking the importance of the time of the observation as the temporal supplants the spatial in the definition of the place. The apparent quiet of the location is indicated by the two additional human characters of the scene, a girl and the restaurant owner, as well as gulls and a dog, which creates a harmonious impression of the town in that particular moment. The details noted by the speaker are scarce but sufficient to create the image of the place in its time of observation and it is that time frame which functions as the essential focus of the poem in spite of the explicit spatial reference of the title. In fact, the speaker uses the restaurant as his ground zero of the observation of the rest of the town visible from that particular point of space, and his gaze eventually comes to rest on the figure of the restaurant owner engaged in his own respective act of contemplation. It is this doubled act that contains the conceptualising of place since the speaker's interpretation of the other figure's action projects the inferred action of that character:

The proprietor of the Chinese restaurant
 Stands at the door as if the world were young,
 Watching the first yacht hoist sail
 – An ideogram on sea-cloud – and the light
 Of heaven upon the hills of Donegal;
 And whistles a little tune, dreaming of home.³⁵

Ambiguity is present in the phrasing as the interjected expression of the ideogram conflates the speaker's point of view with that of the observed figure which in turn destabilises the origin of the observed image of the “light / Of heaven” as to whose observation that actually is. The closing phrase is likewise ambiguous as the scope of the reference of the term “home” is not clarified: it can suggest an actual place as well as the wish of considering a particular place as home.³⁶ The closure of the poem thus shows a perfect concord with the concept of spring in terms of its power of unsettling the usual image of the location.

The poem “North Wind: Portrush”³⁷ provides an account of that usual image of the location yet the title already suggests a somewhat different orientation as it is the wind that is placed first and the name of the place comes only after that. The use of the colon in the title indicates more than one possible

³⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 95

³⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 95

³⁶ cf. Haughton's note on the possible reference of the term as either Hong Kong or the restaurant itself; Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Ch. 5, section 2, par. 20

³⁷ the title of the poem is altered in later collected editions, the place name is eventually omitted. Due to Mahon's frequent revision of his earlier poems, the edition *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999) is used for a number of poems discussed in the essay

relation between the two items: it can function as an alternative to an equation mark as well as suggest a broader potential observational field for the wind of which one particular instance is focused on by the explicit use of the place name. The relative placing of the wind and town reverses what could be the ‘normal’ metonymic associational order since it suggests the weather phenomenon as the larger unit for which the geographical location is one possible connection rather than the more usual conception of regarding the place as the constant and the wind as the changeable item. In accordance with this unsettling reversal intimated by the title, the poem focuses on the wind as the central and constant element of the place in which other conditions represent the unusual case. The speaker tentatively employs the point of view of the visitor in an attempt to find an explanation for seeing the place as acceptable habitation and associates the state of cleanness with the wake of the wind which even gives the impression of the primeval through the image of “the first day”,³⁸ yet the quick remark “the climate is here to stay”³⁹ dispels the illusion of the place as at least occasionally inviting. While “[t]he wrapped-up bourgeoisie” is “[h]ardened by wind and sea”,⁴⁰ the advice is clear and rather disillusioning:

So best prepare for the worst
That chaos and old night
Can do to us; were we not
Raised on such expectations,
Our hearts starved with frost
Through countless generations?⁴¹

The use of the first person plural pronoun indicates the general focus of the speaker’s utterance as it involves in its reference visitor and inhabitant alike. The closing image of the wind as a “weird, plaintive voice” that “[s]ings now and for ever.”⁴² reinforces its role in the construction of the experience of the place which eventually challenges the usual visual domination of the conception of locations as it is the wind that determines the place, the invisible power that manifests through its actions and its effects on the town and its inhabitants. While the title insists on the primacy of the wind in the account, the fact that it is related to a particular place eventually turns that place into the specific target of attention too – and in turn that particular place is defined by its virtually omnipresent characteristic weather condition.

The specific weather condition also plays a significant role in the shaping of the image of the location in the poem “Sunday Morning”. The morning sunlight in London facilitates the visible simultaneous presence of various, and

³⁸ Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*, (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999), 101

³⁹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 101

⁴⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 101

⁴¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 101

⁴² Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 101

rather diverse, groups of inhabitants and visitors in the park that forms the setting, which creates the impression of a special occasion. The place is essentially described by the people present rather than by details of the environment itself with the suggestion of a metonymic relation between place and people, creating what is termed by Haughton a "post-imperial genre-picture of 1980s Hyde Park".⁴³ The occasion is presented as a rare one, with "azure skies" and old ladies who "[w]ait for the rain at close of play"⁴⁴ that mark the occasion as a special one and the speaker participates in the scene as a character who blends in with the observed groups. As Sean O'Brien notes with a general scope, "even when Mahon writes about the city [...] it is somewhere whose population is hardly to be seen",⁴⁵ yet in this specific scene the local population forms an integral part of the scene, as if to complement the unusual occurrence of such morning sunshine as noted by the speaker.

The London residence of the poet, however, is more often seen in different weather conditions, most characteristically associated with rain. The city is "[r]ain-fresh in the morning light"⁴⁶ in the first part of the poem "Afterlives", an account of a visit back to Belfast from the starting point of London. The new light of the morning becomes the analogue of the "bright / Reason"⁴⁷ that forms the foundation of enlightened modern life, which prompts the speaker to outline a consequently bright future just to quickly dispel that vision, indicating the completion of the process of waking up from the early moments of seeing the possibility the new morning brings to the gradual return of the sense of reality. The London setting is exchanged for a shifting one in the second part of the poem as the speaker conducts his visit to the city of his origin. While the night crossing is done in clear weather, as the "moon-splashed waves"⁴⁸ indicate, he is greeted on arrival by "fine rain",⁴⁹ but the overall effect of the rain is different from that of the first part of the poem. Whereas in London the "rain-fresh" city inspires the speaker to translate physical light into metaphoric enlightenment, in Belfast the rainy morning remains enlightening in its immediate physical dimension of allowing the speaker to see and observe the changes to the city suffering from the Troubles. The image of the rain, however, appears a constant in the poem as it accompanies the speaker from one location to the other and thus bridges the spatial gap of distance between the two places. As a weather element, however, it is an essentially temporary feature, yet by its constant, and apparently ubiquitous, presence it manages to remove the temporal distance involved in the journey and contributes to the possibility of a direct and immediate contrast between the

⁴³ Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Ch. 6, section 6, par. 17

⁴⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 124

⁴⁵ Sean O'Brien, "Derek Mahon: *The World as Exile*". In: Sean O'Brien. *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), 98-99

⁴⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 61

⁴⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 61

⁴⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 62

⁴⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 62

place of departure and the destination in spite of the explicit description of the journey itself that physically distances the two locations from each other.

While contemplating the current state of the city on arrival, however, a different time scale is introduced as the speaker's absence from the place is referred to. Although this time span is not specified, the effects of "five years of war"⁵⁰ are visible for the returning native in whose perception the city is a different location to what is preserved in his memories about the place of his upbringing. As emphasis falls on this violent change, a spatial element of permanence is pointed out which is situated beyond the human construct of the city with the potential of being the ultimate point of reference for the elemental existential problem of belonging:

But the hills are still the same
 Grey-blue above Belfast.
 Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
 And lived it bomb by bomb
 I might have grown up at last
 And learnt what is meant by home.⁵¹

The placing of the hills "above" rather than 'beyond' Belfast gives an ominous presence to them, a sense of permanence pointing beyond and staying independent of human endeavour, and this particular phrasing suggests Mahon's view of the general transient nature of human creations, which shows a similar approach to Michael Longley's seeing cities as only temporary constructs,⁵² especially relevant in the context of the Belfast of the Troubles. With that point of reference in sight, the speaker can imagine that the experience of the city through its flow of everyday life could be the source for comprehending the concept "home", perhaps even constitute that experience, yet this remains ambiguous as a conclusion. The auxiliary "might" reduces the possibility to a fairly low level, and the speaker is also reluctant to specify his understanding of the term "home", whether it is the ideal scope of the word or its actual nature as lived experience that is the intended meaning of the otherwise rather tentative act of learning.

In "Dawn at St. Patrick's" the early morning scene is linked with a broader sense of special timing as it is the end of the year when the poem is set, between Christmas and the new year. The rather laconic description of the weather "No snow, but the rain pours down / in the first hour before dawn, / before daylight"⁵³ is in accord with the role of the place, a mental hospital in Dublin, with the speaker engaged in contemplation on his state as well as his surroundings. The coming of the new year brings anticipation of release and

⁵⁰ Mahon, *The Poems*, 62

⁵¹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 62

⁵² cf. Clive Wilmer, "In Conversation with Michael Longley." *PN Review* 96, Volume 20 Number 4, March-April 1994

⁵³ Mahon, *The Poems*, 156

return: release from the place as well as the state that confined him there and return to his 'normal' conditions, yet the speaker suggests the ultimate relativity of these:

Light and sane
 I shall walk down to the train,
 into that world whose sanity we know,
 like Swift, to be a fiction and a show.
 The clouds part, the rain ceases, the sun
 casts now upon everyone
 its ancient shadow.⁵⁴

The unexpected change in the weather, from pouring rain to sunlight, appears as an elegant metaphoric reflection of the release and return the speaker is preparing for, yet the detached and matter-of-fact style of the description indicates routine rather than genuine observation prompted by a subjective sense of the particular experience even if the first two clauses related to rain are the most basic structures possible and the one introducing sunlight follows a more elaborate and sophisticated syntactic plan with its inversion of object and adverbials.

Rain makes a sudden appearance in "Noon at St. Michael's" to transform the location both on its arrival and on letting up. The quickly starting down-pour turns the July weather into "suddenly October"⁵⁵ but the darkness it brings is soon replaced by sunshine again, with the subsequent experience of the place "in that fragrant freshness after rain / when the world seems made anew."⁵⁶ The quick change in the weather eventually prompts the speaker to think of another person in another location, which seemingly turns the specific place and time into mere setting, yet the combination of the spatial elements of that specific location with the weather episode of the current time frame creates the occasion for the mental action of recalling the elsewhere with the figure.

Not only urban locations are presented with their momentary weather situation but landscapes are also often shown in such a way that they become not simply locations mentioned but locations seen in certain conditions, their appearance essentially becoming a function of those particular conditions. The first section of the early poem "Breton Walks" shows a morning scene, the transition from night to day, with the speaker drawing an explicit analogy between the sunrise and creation. Yet the event is "A cold day breaking on silent stones, / Slower than time, spectacular only in size"⁵⁷ whose observation comes with the recognition that the sunrise is not a clearly definable and identifiable moment but a process rather, which in turn shifts the analogy

⁵⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 158

⁵⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 161

⁵⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 161

⁵⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 27

with creation as well, implying an unsettling of the miraculous moment of the instantaneous appearance of light and suggesting a gradual fading in instead:

First there is darkness, then somehow light;
We call this day, and the other night,
And watch in vain for the second of sunrise.⁵⁸

The lone local figure of the old woman is duly “not impressed”⁵⁹ with the sight although the speaker implies that it is the numerous repetitions of the experience that cause the lack of attention to it rather than the speaker’s own meta-physical conceptualisation of its nature as process rather than sudden change.

In “Day Trip to Donegal” the sea is the dominant motif of defining the place rather than the land in spite of the speaker’s visit targeting the latter only. While the weather does not get explicit attention in the poem, the description of two elements still indicate its importance as well as its peculiar nature. The noting of the “deeper green / Than anywhere in the world”⁶⁰ of the hills suggests an abundance of light for the colour to be observed as it is only in such conditions that colours appear fully saturated, yet “the grave / Grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave”⁶¹ suggests darker conditions by the enhanced grimness of the colour grey, made all the more haunting by alliteration and the choice of the word “grave” as an adjective to qualify the colour. The experience of the sea eventually proves to be all-pervasive, the sight is interiorised so much that it finally intrudes upon the mind of the speaker in the form of a disturbing dream of being “alone far out at sea”⁶² during the night following the excursion. The weather imagery, evaded during the description of the place, appears as part of the dream as “vindictive wind and rain”,⁶³ which creates the impression of an altogether hostile location that in turn readjusts the associations of the “deeper green” of the hills towards a wilder and more menacing picture. The whole poem, however, retains an ambiguity as a result of this conclusion – the day trip is recounted following the chronological order of the events described, and it is only the content of the subsequent dream that seems affected by the weather elements noted, which eventually does not make it clear whether those conditions were actually experienced or only imaginatively recalled afterwards.

As the title suggests, “The Sea in Winter” also assigns a major role to the sea in the definition of the observed location. The speaker is situated “in a draughty bungalow in Portstewart”⁶⁴ but his contemplation of the local sea-board is done with his attention shared between the immediate sight and the

⁵⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 27

⁵⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 27

⁶⁰ Mahon, *The Poems*, 30

⁶¹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 30

⁶² Mahon, *The Poems*, 30

⁶³ Mahon, *The Poems*, 30

⁶⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 112

imagined elsewhere of southern islands and their respective seas. In a similar manner to the picture in "North Wind: Portrush", the night is dominated by the "gale-force wind",⁶⁵ yet the morning is a time of quiet weather. While this seems in accordance with Mahon's frequent association of morning scenes with a potential new beginning, this idea is eventually dispelled at the end of the poem on the evidence of the usual daily routine of the place as well as that of the speaker. The picture of the northern location is rather sombre especially in comparison with the suggested elsewhere, and it is the gallery of local characters that indicates the speaker's disdain, yet he mentions the potential attraction of the place in the form of "that Hebridean sunset", and "a strange poetry of decay / charms the condemned hotels by day",⁶⁶ which can ultimately set the imagination in motion even in that location. The attraction, however, belongs to the domain of the natural world, the contribution of humanity involves nothing inviting: "the spite / mankind has brought to this infernal / backwater destroys the soul".⁶⁷ The position of that particular sea-board is consequently seen as liminal, challenging the inhabitant to face "the heroism and cowardice / of living on the edge of space".⁶⁸ The coordination of the contrary states of heroism and cowardice clearly associates ambiguity with the place as to its proper status, which assigns a likewise indeterminate position to the speaker which prompts him to close the poem with the sceptical phrase "I who know nothing go to teach / while a new day crawls up the beach."⁶⁹ This conclusion carries its own ambiguity as it eventually undermines the assumed credibility of the speaker himself but at the same time it ultimately points to the importance of the role of the subjective observer in the construction of the image of the place.

The title of the poem "Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass."⁷⁰ indicates an instance in which one place is focused on from the perspective of another. The place to which the attention of the speaker is directed is only recalled from a relatively well-delineated elsewhere, yet the two places remain eventually unrelated, which renders the place of remembering virtually insignificant and it is accordingly left without any description. The recalled location, however, is not described in concrete terms either, it is referred to as a "dream" in which it is the specific light that gives significance to the scene, which in turn questions the importance of the given location, its features as well as its location as it is essentially the mental impression of that particular sight that is preserved as a special memory that the speaker considers his ultimate point of reference when contemplating landscapes. The mental

⁶⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 112

⁶⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 113

⁶⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 113

⁶⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 114

⁶⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 114

⁷⁰ the title of the poem is shortened to "Inis Oírr" in *The Poems (1961-2020)*, therefore the earlier collected edition is used for reference

impression in question is a specific moment that is a nearly transcendental experience:

A dream of limestone in sea-light
Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.
Reflection in that final sky
Shames vision into simple sight;
Into pure sense, experience.⁷¹

The fluidity of the terms, however, lends a strong sense of ambiguity to the passage, indicating the speaker's sense that language is perhaps not fully adequate to communicate the experience. The "sea-light" as a source of illumination is only reflected light and as such is less intensive and dramatic than what direct exposure would provide. The "final sky" remains undefined by the speaker as to the proper meaning of its status as "final", "vision" is downgraded to "simple sight", apparently depriving it of any possible transcendental dimension, and the semi-colon disrupts the flow of the sentence, which in turn does not fully position the value of "pure sense" and "experience" compared to either vision or sight. The word "reflection" also remains untied to its origin, yet its function as the source of the transformation of the relative significance of vision and sight is insisted on, which suggests a particular moment of extreme power for the contemplating intelligence which is connected to one specific location that is ultimately defined by this set of temporal conditions – it is not Inis Oírr in general that is recalled but Inis Oírr in that particular light facilitated by a certain configuration of meteorological conditions.

While the haunting experience of Inis Oírr has its origin in the natural scenery itself, the poem "Rathlin" describes a place whose current state is a consequence of human action. The island was the scene of numerous massacres in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries which eventually led to its becoming a bird sanctuary, the "unnatural silence"⁷² in the wake of the destruction of the local population was replaced by a "natural silence"⁷³ disturbed only by sounds of the sea and wildlife on the island. As Haughton observes, the silence Mahon notes in poems is often preceded and caused by some atrocity;⁷⁴ in this case the repeated massacres led to the disappearance of permanent human population from the island, handing the place back to the natural world. The image of the island is sketched out in terms of sounds, the local harmony of silence and natural sounds is only disturbed by the "cry of the shearwater / And the roar of the outboard motor",⁷⁵ otherwise the place is a realm of "singular peace".⁷⁶ The importance of sounds is strengthened by the

⁷¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 29

⁷² Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

⁷³ Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

⁷⁴ cf. Haughton, "Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", 107-109

⁷⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

⁷⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

image of the speaker “[s]pray-blind”⁷⁷ while leaving the island, and this state of being deprived of the benefit of sight leads to the uncertainty of “Whether the future lies before us behind.”⁷⁸ The sense of disorientation is further enhanced by the ambiguity of “before” as its reference to space or time is not clarified in the end, although the heavy historical heritage of the island suggests the relevance of both for the position of the speaker.

The poem “Achill”⁷⁹ focuses on another island as its location with a kaleidoscope of weather phenomena and conditions. The three stanzas present the speaker’s contemplation in different times of the day and it is rather light conditions and the weather that receive his attention than details of the actual physical location on the ground. The early morning scene is given no particular marker, but the midday period is characterised by “the glow / Of the sun through mist”⁸⁰ and a quick appearance and passing of rain as “A rain-shower darkens the schist for a minute or so, / Then it drifts away and the sloe-black patches disperse”,⁸¹ and the evening is dominated by rain and wind. While the speaker is engaged in his act of contemplation, marked by the use of the words “gaze” and “consider”, there is a strong challenge to that act indicated by the word “imagine” as his thoughts wander off to his family members, each of them located in a respective elsewhere, and the spatial distance implies an even greater degree of spiritual one as he makes explicit his wish for their presence. While the description of his location is rather sparse, the impression of the place through the conditions mentioned suggests an essentially alien place for the speaker, he remains aloof from what surrounds him. Yet the inability to connect with the place is the source of longing for reclaiming ties with his relatives, thus the place acquires its subjective significance for the speaker as a stimulus that enables as well as prompts him to reflect on his real allegiances and attachments. The poem, however, remains ambiguous as to the status for the speaker of the location itself, as no indication is provided whether it is a temporary setting for a visit or a place intended as residence for a longer time span.

The relationship between the speaker and the location is markedly different in the poem “The Woods”, and as a result, the poem seems a rather unusual one in the Mahon oeuvre. The place is described as a “green retreat, / secluded and sedate”,⁸² suggesting a typical pastoral location, a proper country place which shows no apparent connection with the rest of the world. Although the speaker specifies the time spent in the place, the impression is that of having lost contact with the time of the outside world, which is also hinted at the image of the old clock that “had expired / the night Lenin arrived in Petrograd.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

⁷⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 104

⁷⁹ the poem is renamed “Beyond the Pale” in collected editions after the *Collected Poems* of 1999, therefore that earlier collected edition is used for reference

⁸⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 156

⁸¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 156

⁸² Mahon, *The Poems*, 129

⁸³ Mahon, *The Poems*, 129

The place has its own time scale, that of natural processes, whose images ultimately dominate the description. Human presence, however, is apparently unconnected with those processes as the speaker suggests an existence of contemplation rather than of participation, and although he recalls being occupied by “working in the sun”,⁸⁴ the impression is still that of a gap in concord between the speaker’s life and the conditions of the place. The eventual return to a more conventional environment of “the city and the sea”⁸⁵ shows the essential unsuitability of the place for the speaker and his companion, yet the closure of the poem shows a considerable degree of nostalgia towards it:

Finding, at last,
too creamy for our taste
that fat profusion of that feast,

we carried on
to chaos and confusion,
our birthright and our proper portion.

Another light
than ours convenes the mute
attention of those woods tonight –

while we, released
from that pale paradise,
confront the darkness in another place.⁸⁶

The nostalgia for the place expressed in the final lines strengthens the pastoral appeal of the place, yet the characteristic Mahonian ambiguity is also present as the country retreat is “paradise” but a “pale” one from which the return is “release”, and the “darkness” of the final line also suggests a more general state of limited understanding than the immediately literal reference to the evening scene.

Places in Derek Mahon’s poetry are eventually not “dead” despite the claim in the poem quoted at the beginning. While the scarcity of descriptive items or the bleakness of landscapes can be regarded as indicative of Mahon’s lack of interest in providing accurate and detailed descriptions of locations for their own sake, his tendency to employ metaphysical and conceptualising directions in relation to them shows the ultimate importance of place in his poetry, together with the sense that places are capable of invoking particular spiritual significance for the spectator. The tactics of providing only few but selected details of any location involves ambiguity originating from the focus

⁸⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 129

⁸⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 130

⁸⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 130

of the selection itself, and it is this ambiguity that directs attention to the importance of the given location in the particular moment. While details are indeed not abundant, it is not only spatial elements that are pointed out to characterise places but weather conditions as well, adding meteorology to topography and suggesting the role of the temporal element in the experience of place. Place is thus never simply a self-contained physical place for Mahon, a spatial category characterised by considerable permanence in the timespan of observation, but place as product, a more complex category capable of change due to the inclusion of temporal variables, suggesting also a more active role of the speaker in shaping the scope and focus of the description.

Mahon's poems dealing with places throw light on the enhanced role of the contemplating intelligence and as a consequence, the subjective element in observation. The conceptualisation derives from the contemplated details but is essentially determined by the response of the contemplating mind to the outside stimulus, thus what is offered is a mediated vision, an impression of the place filtered through the speaker's momentary position, of what his intellect associates with the particular sight of the moment. This approach renders places in Mahon's poetry specific instances of the representation of the chosen locations, the places featured reflect *his* vision and understanding of them, with no explicit claim of universality for the position of this particular speaker. The result is a specific approach to place which ultimately sets his poetic practice apart from that of others in the Irish context, based principally on the position of his speaker. While the utterance is anchored,⁸⁷ the speaker's general position does not present a similar attachment to place that is demonstrated by fellow Irish poets such as John Montague, Seamus Heaney or even Michael Longley, moreover, as Sam Solnick remarks, "he uses other spaces and times to modify the here and now."⁸⁸ This lack of a solid central point of reference leads to Mahon's shifting relative position in his treatment of place and that gives rise to the ambiguity that characterises his accounts.

Ambiguity, however, becomes an asset for the respective speakers of the poems as it facilitates a more dynamic representation due to the inherent plurality of possible interpretations of the given scene. The inclusion of temporal elements, such as references to particular moments or weather phenomena and processes further activate the potential of dynamic representation, as these eventually add a temporal frame to the experience. In spite of the claim of being "dead", Mahon's places are in fact very much alive as they enter into interaction with his speakers' momentary state of mind and impinge on them, to affect, if not necessarily determine, the course of their poetic renderings. This is all the more tangible when the same location is evoked in different moments, and this repeated assessment has a close connection with the ambiguity involved in the descriptions: the speaker's awareness of a different experience of the 'same' place in different moments and conditions necessarily

⁸⁷ cf. Haughton, "Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", 93

⁸⁸ Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene. ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 109

leads to a particular instance of representation and not a universal one with permanent validity. The conclusion of the poem “A Garage in Co. Cork” is the most explicit phrasing of this position, yet that is not without an element of ambiguity in that particular form either: the assertion “We might be anywhere but are in one place only”⁸⁹ clarifies the ultimate feature of existence in terms of its spatial confinement but its dependence on its temporal confinement is only implicitly included in it. Yet as place is always place in a given moment for the Mahonian speaker, its “intrinsic nature”⁹⁰ is always a function of its particular moment of contemplation, with a propensity for change with the alteration of its conditions. Mahon’s geography is therefore that of ambiguity, of the moment, of potential shifts that challenge those very anchorings that attempt to define them in terms of time and space, which ultimately render these places very much alive.

⁸⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 128

⁹⁰ Mahon, *The Poems*, 128

“A place of dispersals”: Michael Longley’s Western Centre of Gravity

In an interview with Dermot Healey in 1995, Michael Longley outlined his concept of home in the following way: “Home is Belfast. Belfast is home. I love the place. The city, the hills around it, County Down, County Antrim. My home from home is in Mayo. But home is Belfast. It has nothing to do with literature.”¹ Both the style and the content of this account are worthy of examination since they reveal Longley’s rather complex understanding of the concept of home. The short sentences that employ basic grammatical structures, standing as proof of what Seamus Heaney called the “famous // Northern reticence”,² indicate a solid conviction as to the scope of the term, yet the introduction of another version of home, in a similarly clear-cut manner, hints at a bifurcated sense of the concept. Although the phrase “I love” marks the affective element, the emphasis of the passage falls on some geographical markers, those of a city and a county, which are broad enough to indicate larger areas rather than neatly delineated neighbourhoods with particular personal details. The detaching of the concept of home from literature is reflected in the fact that Longley rarely mentions his permanent Belfast residence in his poetry, which in turn makes his understanding of the term more ambiguous in itself. The duplicating of the concept in the image of a home from home suggests the possibility of considering home as a non-exclusive category which can thus be associated with more locations, apparently detaching it from the territorial as well. This creates a paradoxical situation since Longley’s speaker appears strongly embedded in the particular spatial context out of which he speaks yet the place itself is not solid enough to function as an absolute as it requires a point of reference beyond itself for self-definition.

In another interview, with Clive Wilmer, Longley hints at the complexity of the concept of home and explains that his focus on home is “not in a cosy sense”: “it’s an enormous concept, home, and it’s menaced and threatened wherever one looks.”³ As for the dangers that threaten the integrity of the notion, he claims “When the idea of home coincides with an idea of territory, when there are power struggles within home, that’s when the whole thing can

¹ quoted in Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities. Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 112

² Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), 53

³ Clive Wilmer, “In Conversation with Michael Longley.” *PN Review* 96, Volume 20 Number 4, March-April 1994

explode dangerously.”⁴ With the Troubles as a part of the everyday reality of life in Belfast for decades, the territorial and the power struggles provide a tangible danger for any sense of home in the city, thus the scope of the term comes under attack, which in turn sets up the need for a balancing and mitigating other, manifesting in the idea of a home from home. Longley admits not to have written about the city and his explanation for this lies in his preference of natural elements to man-made constructs as he is generally sceptical about the endurance of the latter.⁵

While biography indeed proves that Belfast is Longley’s home, his County Mayo home from home is a more elemental presence in his poetry. Longley’s choice of a townland in the rural West stands in stark contrast with his Northern urban background and residence. The usual association of the West with tradition and genuine Irish experience⁶ offers the poet a different vantage point compared to what Belfast represents. The image of County Mayo as the par excellence embodiment of the country suggests a pastoral dimension to it, with the pastoral understood broadly as the discourse of the country. Yet as Robert Welch notes, Longley’s assessment of the West is related to “the puritan attitude to landscape”⁷, regarding it in a double perspective, both as a “‘good place’, the *locus amoenus*, where human and natural worlds are in accord”⁸ and simultaneously with suspicion as “there is the sense that landscapes, even beautiful ones, may be false, lures to trap the sensitive mind, weakly seeking rest, relief from tension.”⁹ Longley’s country experience is expressed by acts of watching and contemplating the natural world, and he does not focus on the local human population at all. As he explains it, “When I go to the West of Ireland, I don’t go there to have colourful talks with the natives. I go there to look at birds and flowers and the beautiful countryside.”¹⁰ Therefore his accounts exclude much of the tradition itself and remain only a hint at the pastoral. While Donna L. Potts regards several poems of Longley set in the West “pastoral elegies”,¹¹ the poems are perhaps better termed elegies in a country setting as they do not display the interest of the pastoral.

While indeed the West, as authentic Irish country beyond the political division of the island,¹² can be seen as the almost par excellence pastoral setting by virtue of its physical environment and the predominantly rural population, Longley does not direct his attention to this possible reading of the region. As it is depicted, his Carrigskeewaun, a sparsely populated townland in County

⁴ Wilmer, “In Conversation with Michael Longley.”

⁵ cf. Wilmer, “In Conversation with Michael Longley.”

⁶ cf. Robert Welch, “Michael Longley and the West.” In: Alan J. Peacock and Katherine Devine (eds.), *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2000), 58

⁷ Welch, “Michael Longley and the West”, 58

⁸ Welch, “Michael Longley and the West”, 58

⁹ Welch, “Michael Longley and the West”, 58

¹⁰ Wilmer, “In Conversation with Michael Longley.”

¹¹ cf. Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 78

¹² for a more detailed assessment see Péter Dolmányos, “Beyond Division: The West in Contemporary Irish Poetry”. *Eger Journal of English Studies*. vol. VIII. 2008, pp. 41-50

Mayo, is a place with little human activity, most of which is the act of observation carried out by the speaker of the respective poem. Longley's focus is directed predominantly towards nature, his poems concerned with the place are observations of wildlife with no reference to human intervention, even local landmarks receive little attention unless wildlife is considered as such. There is no suggestion of the traditional pastoral, it is rather nature poetry, with the human observer constantly at a remove from the natural course of life that unfolds independently of human presence. The observer, however, retains his importance as it is through his acts of contemplation that an insight is gained into the reality of this natural world by capturing its essential difference from the humanised vision of the pastoral tradition. As Alan Peacock notes, Longley avoids the dangers of the false lure of pastoral temptation by "his genuinely sympathetic and at the same time coolly scientific engagement with the particularities of the environment."¹³ Longley does not subscribe to a pastoral ecology but neither does his approach become an ecocritical one as his engagement remains that of a self-confessed naturalist with no strict ecological concentration.

Longley turns to the West principally for his love of and interest in nature¹⁴, but his relation with the place eventually transforms it into a form of home for him. While the geographical delineation of the location is clearly marked, the concept of this particular kind of home does not appear to depend for Longley on territorial attachment: it is rather an expression of a state of mind he experiences in that particular location. His displayed intimacy with the Mayo townland can be seen to originate from his ability "to see himself as a figure in a landscape, part of the natural process",¹⁵ which suggests the possibility of locating himself in and consequently defined on the occasion by that particular environment, thus allowing the place to approximate the criteria of home. His status, however, retains a degree of ambiguity as his observing position still keeps him from fully blending in, leading to the definition of the place as home from home, a category which depends on an external point of reference for its interpretation. As Adam Hanna notes, the phrase suggests the feeling of the same range of experience in relation to safety as home itself, but at the same time it involves the possibility of finding security "away from a place of belonging".¹⁶ As Longley's first experience of Carrigskeewaun falls into the timeframe of the early years of the Troubles, the Northern situation would prove a stronger motivation for finding a second home, rather than the traditional pastoral dichotomy of urban and rural, which also explains his insistence on Belfast being considered as home and the western location as home from home.

¹³ Alan Peacock, "Michael Longley. Poet Between Worlds." In: Michael Kenneally (ed.). *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1995), 272

¹⁴ cf. Wilmer, "In Conversation with Michael Longley"

¹⁵ Peacock, "Michael Longley: Poet Between Worlds", 272

¹⁶ Adam Hanna, *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 68

Despite being declared “home”, the city of Belfast features only very rarely in Longley’s poems. Even when it is mentioned, Belfast is represented mainly by metonymy or synecdoche: the city appears only as the indication of a specific place that forms the spatial context of the event which is focused on, with either the name of the city provided as the sole definite reference or some specific part of the city mentioned to evoke the image of the place during the Troubles. In the verse letter “To Derek Mahon” Belfast is referred to as “the city of guns and long knives” caught in the “stereophonic nightmare / Of the Shankill and the Falls”,¹⁷ which is in stark opposition with the poetic concerns of the speaker and the addressee, and the image of the city is quickly contrasted with the memory of an excursion to one of the Aran islands. In the verse letter, of the same cycle, “To Seamus Heaney”, it is only the name of the city that appears. The word “home” is also present in the poem, yet it is offered as the rather peculiar and unusual rhyming pair of “welcome”, and the scope of the word is altogether broader as its reference extends to the whole of Northern Ireland. The significance of the city is thus reduced, it only functions as the common place of residence for the speaker and the addressed friend. The much later poem “The Ice-Cream Man” has Belfast for its setting, identified by the explicit mentioning of Lisburn Road, but the focus of the poem is the murder of the title figure rather than the place. The list of wild flowers making up the second half of the poem stands in stark contrast with the urban location, both in terms of the origin of the flowers in the Burren and the speaker’s tactics of setting up one single urban detail against a comprehensive list of country items. The city of Belfast remains an essentially figurative, predominantly metonymic presence in Longley’s poems: it is not a place that is properly represented in the textual world and as such it does not become an explicit personal expression of home in the poetry itself.

Longley first used the phrase “home from home” in the short poem entitled “The West”, published in the volume *An Exploded View* (1973). The unspecified country location is described with phenomena rather than with objects, and the speaker is engaged in activities of listening and watching, which suggests an environment that facilitates observation. Yet while listening is directed towards the outside world as the intermingling of the radio broadcast and sounds of the surroundings indicate, watching is self-centred as it is his own image that occupies the attention of the speaker. The blending of the radio broadcast with the sounds of the local inanimate environment prepares the introduction of the doubling of the motif of home: while it is “news from home”¹⁸ that the speaker is listening for, these are embedded in a set of local sounds, thus near and far are brought together. Their convergence is not labelled cacophony or interference by the speaker but rather a communion, which lends the distant cottage something of the associations of home, so that it can explicitly become “home from home”¹⁹ by the end of the second stanza. The conclusion of

¹⁷ Michael Longley, *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 58

¹⁸ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 69

¹⁹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 69

the poem, in addition to answering the expectation raised in the "news from home" phrase of the first stanza, creates a sense of attachment to the place, but the speaker's observation of himself retains a degree of ambiguity as it is not clear whether it is his actual reflection that he is contemplating on site or it is a memory of himself in that particular location that is recalled elsewhere and at another time.

While the overall impression of the location hints at its independent and self-contained existence without any human action, the speaker's presence still endows it with specific meaning. The image of the cottage is constructed in such a way in the poem that it suggests a place of intimacy for the speaker. His acts, as a result, appear habitual, implying routine and the subsequent feeling of belonging, justifying his term "home" for the place. Yet there remains that ambiguity about self-observation which is further deepened by the image of himself as it is described while approaching the cottage and by details referring only to the outside of the building, with no hint at the interior or the figure eventually entering the cottage, as "home" would imply. The speaker's habit of contemplation, however, indicates his act of settling in, his acceptance of his status as an observer in that particular environment without a feeling of pastoral at-one-ness, which suggests a meaning for the concept of home a specific state of mind rather than territorial attachment. While the doubling of the idea of home could suggest the pastoral movements of retreat and return,²⁰ the explicit linking of the two homes undermines the required sense of disconnection between the two locations and implies constant awareness of the underlying relation that makes the perspective of the poem possible.

While the exact location remains unidentified in "The West", the poem "Carrigskeewaun" names its location in a precise manner. This poem, however, presents a different type of picture as it is essentially a tableau composed of five named sections offering glimpses of aspects of the place in the title. Although some of the section headings are man-made items, the place described in the poem is generally devoid of human presence, any trace of it is only suggested by cattle tracks and the footprints of children and of the speaker. The place is shown to be rather unwelcoming: it is "ravens' territory, skulls, bones",²¹ and the speaker appears to be more of an intruder than a guest as he disturbs the usual order of life. Although the speaker's perspective is located in the place and there is a sense of familiarity with the surroundings indicated by the carefully observed details, the speaker does not seem to become an integral part of the scene, his observations preserve the distance between the contemplating intelligence and the contemplated object. The environment itself refuses the generic pastoral vision of the country as it is not an attractive piece of nature that surrounds the observer, nor is it the product

²⁰ cf. Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 81; Terry Gifford, "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral." In: L. Westling (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18

²¹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 68

of human ingenuity expressed through organising agricultural action, and his presence accordingly maintains a sense of detachment.

Although the poem “Ghost Town” does not specify its exact location, the figure of the “lighthouse-keeper”²² suggests its vicinity to the coast and its overall impression links the place to the West of Ireland. The speaker’s choice of the place as his intended residence for a long period of time associates it with the idea of home, yet the closing line of the poem indicates that it is another instance of home from home. The place is apparently intended as a retreat and is shown to be the ideal one: a “place of interminable afternoons”,²³ with “Sad cottages”²⁴ and few residents only. While he has a carefully outlined plan of actions to complete in the chosen place, its status is ambiguous as he asserts “Already I have retired there”²⁵ – it is the adverbial “there” that prompts the question of the perspective itself, since the word “here” would be the adequate one for writing from the place. His intention “I shall become the local eccentric”²⁶ is likewise an ambiguous reference as it suggests both settling in and its opposite in relation to the very small local community, in addition to the likewise contrasting relation between the tenses of the two clauses and their respective grammatical references as to the temporal scope. His refusal of known relations, “family / And friends are definitely not welcome”²⁷ distances the concept of his original home but the rest of the final stanza maintains that ambiguity which his earlier mentioned plan indicated:

Although by the time I am accepted there
(A reputation and my own half-acre)
I shall have written another letter home.²⁸

Both the idea of being accepted and the word “there” keep up the lure of the place as opposed to the place of departure, yet the indication of writing a letter home insists on the importance of the place of origin. While in the verse letter to Heaney “welcome” and “home” formed a rhyme, in this poem the two words are sufficiently kept apart, and as the rest of the poem also dispenses with rhymes, the possibility offered by the similar sounds of the two words can go unnoticed, contributing to the bipolar vision of home.

The poem “In Mayo” presents the scenario of finding a country place as a temporary residence with the implications of a home from home. Apart from the title it is not specified what the exact location is, the word “townland” suggests a typical country place which does not add any more specific information to what the title conveys. The speaker and his partner are engaged in typical

²² Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²³ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²⁴ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²⁵ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²⁶ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²⁷ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

²⁸ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 72

visitor's activities befitting the potential of the environment, and the local population is only mentioned for their curiosity towards the visitors. The speaker's deliberate standing out may reflect strangeness and exoticism which fuels local curiosity, yet this is an indication at the same time that they are still interested in what the locals think about them. This in turn suggests the speaker's intention of wishing to belong, implying his act of regarding the place as a home from home, which is further strengthened by their activities themselves that show a strongly intimate dimension. The descriptive details of the poem, however, do not create a full picture of its attraction for the speaker, it is mainly the implications of the title that outline its basic features, which eventually suggests a similar ambiguity concerning the place as in Longley's other such locations.

The short poem "Migrations" also employs the phrase "home from home" yet the poem itself does not set out to endow the phrase with a particular meaning in its own context, therefore it relies on definition and associations from Longley's earlier use of it in other poems. The snapshot-like details only include a hill and nests of birds but offer no precise delineation of the location. The phrase itself comes as a motif apparently unrelated to anything specific in the place, and the speaker's opening thought of "I have hidden a key under the dry-stone wall / For lovers to make after me a home from home"²⁹ carries a grammatical ambiguity that sets the use of the motif apart from its earlier occurrences: it is the word "after" that can suggest a simple temporal succession as well as indicate the idea of an example for the lovers to follow. The image of lovers correlates neatly with the nests, although the nests are "pebbly", suggesting a rather rugged set of features, capable of undermining the image of home, yet the speaker's final sentence inserts distance and therefore difference between the nests and his own place: "I sleep on the other side of the hill from them."³⁰ Similarly to the other poems, the concept remains undefined, impression-like rather than concrete, and its relation to a distant home insists on the speaker's position as temporary and aloof in spite of his apparent casualness for being located in the given place.

The usual relation between Longley's home and home from home is reversed in the poem "Remembering Carrigskeewaun". The title defines the perspective and locates the poem in an elsewhere in relation to the place, which in turn will shift the relative positions and statuses of his two categories. The "wintry night"³¹ turns the chimney into a "voice-box recalling animals",³² which propels the memory of the place and the shift of perspective as the recalled place takes over as home:

Home is a hollow between the waves,
A clump of nettles, feathery winds,
And memory no longer than a day

²⁹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 166

³⁰ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 166

³¹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 170

³² Longley, *Collected Poems*, 170

When the animals come back to me
 From the townland of Carrigiskeewaun,
 From a page lit by the Milky Way.³³

The vividness of the memory results also in a contraction of the time scale as the recalled summer experience is from a time “no longer than a day” away. The closure of the poem functions as a bridge between the memory and actuality as the final line indicates the time of composition, yet this image also involves its own ambiguity as it is also possible to regard it as a self-reflexive comment on Longley’s earlier poems dealing with the place. In addition, the poem presents an experience in a way that, as Robert Welch observes as a characteristic of Longley, is “process rather than product”,³⁴ which is in concord with the non-finite verb form of the title of the poem, lacking the feature of being marked for time.

Another aspect of Carrigiskeewaun is shown in “The Lapwing” to provide a different angle to the earlier established vision of the place, understood in general as “magical territory”.³⁵ The opening line of the poem, “Carrigiskeewaun in May light has unsettled me”³⁶ suggests a potential power for the place that was not presented in earlier poems dealing with the location, and this new experience appears to destabilise its status as a home from home. The situation surrounding the speaker leaves him puzzled as the environment shows its less comforting face with death and decay in spite of the May setting, and the sound of the bird of the title is laconically identified with the words “Why me?”³⁷ This leads to a form of conversation between the speaker and the bird yet the exchange is not more than mutual watching and the repetition of the same phrase which indeed marks a state of unsettledness. The proper cause and source of the speaker’s feeling, however, remains unspecified due to the ambiguity of the phrasing of the opening line as “May light” is placed right after the place-name, which eventually does not decide whether it is the place or the specific time that provides the unusual experience. The ‘conversation’ between the speaker and the bird is likewise strange since the onomatopoeic sound of the birdsong is still not language in spite of its proximity to human utterance, and although the speaker’s act of considering it as imitation of that particular phrase could create the impression of harmony through the mutual repetition of the same sounds, it leads to the recognition of difference, maintaining that feeling of unsettledness.

One of the few instances in which Longley explicitly refers to the presence of human civilisation interacting with the physical environment is the poem “The Excavator”. The human action is that of an excavator digging “Near the

³³ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 170

³⁴ Welch, “Michael Longley and the West”, 59

³⁵ Alan Peacock, “How do you sew the night?: *The Weather in Japan*”. In: Alan J. Peacock and Katherine Devine (eds.). *The Poetry of Michael Longley* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2000), 152

³⁶ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 243

³⁷ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 243

duach, between the lakes, no more than / More space for water and water-birds."³⁸ The action is, in the speaker's assessment, beneficial and is not seen as interference, yet its consequence acquires another type of significance, and an unmistakably humanly conceited one since its result is at the same time "a pond / For you and me to look at from the double bed",³⁹ giving the hint of a self-centred interpretation of the point of the action. The final line of the poem, however, appears to tilt the focus back on nature: "Imagine a kestrel stooping to tipple there."⁴⁰ Yet this line still includes the observer's self-conscious position as the proposed act of the bird, a part of its natural routine, will become available for the observer as experience only through the deliberate action of watching. The poem is thus an example of Longley's view of the rural West as home from home, with an insistence on nature's priority in his observation in which even human actions blend into something with a natural end yet this is only interpreted as such by an observing human intelligence.

The status of Carrigskeewaun as home from home is radically revised in the poem "Above Dooaghtry" as the place is singled out to be the self-chosen burial site of the speaker. The final resting place of the speaker is envisioned in detail in such a way as to become an integral part of nature, seamlessly blending in with the flora and fauna of the area. This idea indicates the perfect communion with nature, the expression of the romantic ideal of at-one-ness with the natural world, with a strong hint at Wordsworth's Lucy-poems. At the same time, however, it revises the concept of home as well: the closing image, "Our sandy dander to Allaran Point / Or Tonakeera will take for ever",⁴¹ provides a stark contrast to the temporary and finite nature of earthly existence and thus makes the temporal a vital element of the understanding of home. The choice of the long-time home from home as the final resting place also reconfigures the usual sense of attachment associated with the two types of home and as such it suggests the ultimate lack of solidity of the concept.

Although it is envisioned as a potential final place, Carrigskeewaun retains its function as a current home from home for Longley. The poem "The Leveret", dedicated to one of the grandsons of the poet, focuses on the figure of the baby boy and his first night in the place. The fact of the visit already indicates the sense of continuity in relation to the significance of the location, yet the cottage is also identified as the child's place of conception, which creates a more sophisticated bond between the place and an unspecified elsewhere from where the visitors arrive. While that elsewhere is the home by virtue of permanent residence, the visited cottage, as home from home, is at the same time the place of origin as the idea of conception suggests, raising the possible question of primacy. This, at the same time, also hints at the essentially arbitrary nature of any particular position as the rather vague idea of the possibility of identifying the moment of conception is provided as the

³⁸ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 244

³⁹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 244

⁴⁰ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 244

⁴¹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 289

original link to the place. The speaker's excitement about the visit is expressed in a longish list of proposed activities that concern the introduction of the surrounding world to the baby, with an explicit indication of the speaker's wish for a close affinity between the natural and the human worlds, already suggested by the choice of the title of the poem itself. The speaker's effusive attitude moves him out of his usual detached position as a contemplating visitor, and while he looks eager to share the practice of watching the wildlife, he admits to "have picked wild flowers"⁴² already for the child, which is an uncharacteristic interference with the natural world on his part. This indicates a shifting concern as the intention of sharing his experience with the prospect of passing it on takes over from the self-motivated contemplation of the earlier poems, which in turn suggests a stronger sense of belonging to the place, with an eye to continuity for succeeding generations, broadening the scope of his understanding of home from home.

The poem "The Wren" contains an instance of self-reflection in relation to Longley's treatment of Carrigskeewaun. Similarly to the previous poem, it is preoccupied with the visit of grandchildren and the opportunity that the visit provides for the speaker for sharing his engagement with the place, especially its natural dimensions. The speaker's intention of introducing the natural world to the children has for its point of departure the plan, and apparently practice, to "generalise at once about cows and sheep",⁴³ which indicates the role of these domestic animals as a link between the world of human civilisation and that of nature, also offering a tentative hint at the pastoral. This possible direction, however, is quickly dispensed with in the rest of the description as the speaker's focus on nature outside the human sphere of action is established, and the poem eventually follows the usual Longley course of including the human element in the scene only as the contemplating agent. Where the poem differs from his usual treatment of its subject is the opening line with a self-reflexive, even self-critical, moment: "I am writing too much about Carrigskeewaun",⁴⁴ since this assertion suggests an awareness of his excessive attention dedicated to the place. Yet the fourth line provides some kind of explanation for this as the experience of time is rather special: "A day here represents a life-time".⁴⁵ This relativizing of humanly comprehensible time-scales mitigates the critical power of the opening line as well as adding another feature to the concept of home from home, that of the different experience of time, yet there is no indication that a similar potential could be associated with the original home as well.

The cottage demonstrates another mysterious power of attraction in the poem "The Fold" as sheep gather around the building. The speaker finds no explanation for the phenomenon and appears content to associate their presence with a form of protection for the child sleeping inside through the image of

⁴² Longley, *Collected Poems*, 327

⁴³ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 328

⁴⁴ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 328

⁴⁵ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 328

their wool. While in Longley's accounts it is predominantly the natural world that is in the focus, here there is a marked shift of attention to the building itself and to animals with a strong bond to humans. This is apparently brought about by the presence of the grandchild which, similarly to the poems "The Leveret" and "The Wren", resituates the centre of gravity for the speaker. Whereas in those other poems the speaker's attention eventually returns to his usual preoccupation with the local wildlife, this poem follows a different trajectory as the perspective shifts from outside to inside, suggesting a domestic focus more readily linked to the concept of home and offers the possibility of considering the validity of the pastoral in relation to the concept.

While most of Longley's poems dealing with Carrigskeewaun are set in summer based on the poet's regular visits in that season, the poem "The Holly Bush" is connected with winter. As the poem is an elegy dedicated to the memory of Dorothy Molloy, the winter setting is a more adequate one for the occasion, and at the same time it also suggests the increased importance of the place for the speaker as it no longer functions as a summer retreat only. The occasion of the elegy, however, connects the thought of passing to the location, which leads in the final poem of the volume, entitled "Greenshank", to the speaker's own reflection on his final departure from the place. The tentative future account follows the same pattern as Longley's other poems dealing with the natural world in the townland but its context renders the picture more precarious as it expresses a vision which lies beyond the speaker's own shaping powers. Yet as he meditates on the possible discovery by the addressee of something overlooked by the speaker himself, he still intends to direct the course of the future act of observation by suggesting for its subject the bird named in the title. The closing image of the birdsong as a reminder call for the addressee is also an elegant act of linking the bird's sound with the sounds and rhythms of poetry, which in turn suggests an implicit confirmation of the status of the location as some form of home – even if the context is that of leaving that home for the final time.

The volume *Angel Hill* (2017) also contains poems reflecting on the significance of Carrigskeewaun for Longley, commemorating fifty years of concern with the place. Two poems make explicit references to this time span for his attention paid to his chosen home from home, "Fifty Years" and "Age". While the former is a celebration not only of the time devoted to the townland but of his wife as companion to all his explorations of the region, the latter concentrates on the speaker in his isolated practice of observation. In that way the poems create tension between themselves as to the situation of the observer, yet both are constructed on the usual pattern of wildlife details and both include an explicitly drawn link between the act of observation and poetry. The poem "Age" eventually contains another self-reflexive element on the necessity of increased concentration for the act of observation and shows an affinity with the poem "Greenshank" for the idea of missing or leaving out something of what the environment offers. The result is a toned-down account, with an increased focus on the pure registering of the observed phenomena,

suggesting an aspiration for the desired romantic ideal of unmediated vision. With the passing of time the apparent focus of Longley's concern moves from the aesthetic distillation of the experience towards its increasingly pure representation which has its anticipation in his lists in earlier poems such as "The Ice-Cream Man". With the bared down account the observing intelligence takes a step back to suggest ontological, rather than epistemological, limits to representation which paradoxically further emphasises its presence in the process of observation. This eventually renders him a part of the scene almost in spite of the attempt of simple recording and is at once the indication of the essence of his concept of his home from home, and implicitly, of his original concept of home.

The Carrigskeewaun cottage at first offered the experience of a holiday resort for Longley. The Mayo townland, an isolated cottage in a sparsely populated rural environment, was a counterpoint to his urban grounding in his Belfast home, which could readily raise the possibility of a pastoral escape, a retreat, especially given the time frame of the earliest visits during the early, and most intense, years of the Troubles. The Mayo place also provided him with the necessary distance for reflection on the Northern situation as the altogether different environment would liberate the poet from direct and immediate influences and pressures at home. Yet while the place of departure remained a clear point of reference to consider Carrigskeewaun only as temporary location for the poet, its appeal turned it into a home from home for him, which in turn would also strengthen the position of Belfast as home. The earliest poems focus on this duality and provide constant reminders of the distance between the two places, yet with a marked preference for the Western location, since as opposed to the very scarce references to Belfast, Carrigskeewaun features widely in Longley's poetry. In the later poems a revision can be observed of the seemingly rigid duality of home and home from home, a loosening up of the imaginative distance between them. By directing even more attention to the country location, there is a suggestion of that particular place increasingly being endowed with all the functions of home, calling into to question their relative positions and essentially reducing the difference between the two originally separately noted concepts by their convergence.

Adam Hanna notes the open-ended quality of much of Longley's work⁴⁶ which is also confirmed by the poet in interviews.⁴⁷ This is especially valid for the poems focusing on Longley's Mayo experience: "[h]is poetry located at the cottage at Carrigskeewaun is centrally concerned with journeys rather than arrivals; forays rather than fixity, temporary, even precarious, inhabitation, rather than settlement and ownership."⁴⁸ As Longley's poetry does not display a similar engagement with the Belfast of his residence, the relationship

⁴⁶ cf. Hanna, *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space*, 64

⁴⁷ cf. Wilmer, "In Conversation with Michael Longley"; Jody Allen Randolph, "Interview: Michael Longley and Jody Allen Randolph." *Colby Quarterly*, Volume 39, no.3, September 2003

⁴⁸ Hanna, *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space*, 64

between the two locations is only tentatively outlined, it is inferred rather than clarified in the poems themselves. Yet by virtue of its peculiar position his home from home is also characterised by a strong sense of ambiguity, expressed in terms of word choice and word order as well as the presented pictures of the place, all pointing towards the essentially temporal nature of habitation in any place, and consequently of the human experience of place too, which also harks back to the title of Longley's first collection, *No Continuing City*. In the poem "Landscape" the setting is a place with the omnipresence of change with profound effects:

I am clothed, unclothed
By racing cloud shadows,
Or else disintegrate
Like hillside neighbour
Erased by sea mist.⁴⁹

The speaker refers to his surroundings as a "place of dispersals"⁵⁰ where transformations happen, shapes metamorphose into each other and the reflection of the speaker blends into his real self, which implies a place of no solid boundaries in spite of the presence of stable and constant items that make up its overall system. Moreover, the phrase "place of dispersals" is a reconsideration of the notion of place as a stable and reliable point of reference per se: although possible to locate as an item described by coordinates within a finite spatial set, it is seen and understood as denying that very stability that the mathematical concept of coordinates would embody. Longley's western home from home is located in such a zone, thus its understanding remains similarly capable of shifting and floating, by which it mirrors the processes of the surrounding environment itself. This eventual analogy between the environment and the observer's condition creates that dynamism that allows the speaker to consider the place his home from home, in the final analysis, a form of home, however much the concept remains evasive in its ambiguity.

⁴⁹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 91

⁵⁰ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 91

“Yet something mourns.”
Pastoral Elements
in John Montague’s Poetry

Antoinette Quinn may have described John Montague as a “pastoral poet manqué”¹ with all the implications of the phrase pivoting on that final word, but Montague’s relation with the pastoral tradition is more complex than what such a concise phrase may incorporate. She goes on to refer to the poet as an “elegist”², which shifts the focus of her previous phrase somewhat with the paradox of the elegy in mind.³ However, Montague’s poems that can be associated with the pastoral in one way or the other represent a particular and peculiar approach, offering a subtle critique of the tradition rather than employing it with unquestioned conviction of its relevance to the experience he seeks to present. Although the poet himself admitted his appreciation of Goldsmith’s poem “The Deserted Village”,⁴ this gesture is at once an act of destabilising and opening up his own approach to the tradition the poem is a part of. As Terry Gifford remarks in connection with “The Deserted Village”, “[w]ritten as an anti-pastoral it came to be read as a pastoral”,⁵ Goldsmith’s poem is rather a testimony to the complexity, as well as the inherent ambiguity, of the whole tradition referred to as pastoral, especially when its interpretation is concerned.

From among the three meanings of the term pastoral that Gifford mentions it is the first two that bears relevance to Montague’s poetry. The first understanding of the term denotes the literary tradition that focuses on the world of the country, and that of shepherds in particular, and which involves the motifs of retreat and return, altogether representing a stylised rendering of what is conceived to be country life. The second sense of the term broadens this into a more general depicting of life in the country as opposed to the urban world and involves a tendency to celebrate what is presented in that way.⁶ Both these uses of the term include a perspective that is allegedly of another position and which is based on a projected ideal which in turn produces a vision of the country based on escapist premises. More direct contact with the

¹ Antoinette Quinn, “The Well-Beloved: Montague and the Muse”. *Irish University Review*, Spring, 1989, Vol. 19, No. 1, 31

² Quinn, “The Well-Beloved: Montague and the Muse”, 31

³ cf. Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce*. (2nd ed.) Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997, 184

⁴ Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 19

⁵ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 122

⁶ cf. Gifford, *Pastoral*, 1-2

country, however, leads to the dispensing with the idealising tendency and introduces the actual experience of what Seamus Heaney sums up as “sweat and pain and deprivation”.⁷ The acknowledgement of these constituents of country life leads to a considerable degree of overlap between pastoral and anti-pastoral to the extent of the occasional interchangeability of the two terms.

Retreat and return are considered fundamental elements of the tradition. Pastoral is understood as “essentially a discourse of retreat”,⁸ and “there must be in some sense a return from that location [of retreat] to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood.”⁹ Leo Marx identifies the simple case of escape from a particular context (that of the city or the court) as sentimental pastoral in opposition to the complex pastoral of the more sophisticated case of exploring that context, with the latter form including not only the idyllic appeal of the country but some form of dissonance that causes anxiety in it.¹⁰ Both types, however, depend on the necessary presence of a place of departure and the subsequent return to it as it is only in that relation that the pastoral can provide the insight it is supposed to represent. The existence of the two spatial reference points also functions as a reminder of the nature of pastoral discourse: it is neither “the sophisticated discourse of the court” nor “the illiterate discourse of the real shepherd”¹¹ but one located somewhere between them, just as the good place of the tradition is located between the city and uncultivated raw nature.¹² Regardless of the precise positioning of that discourse, the recognition of pastoral as discourse is the precondition to the working of the tradition, which is at once the admittance of its limitation due to its essence as discourse.

Questions regarding the adaptability and adequacy of the pastoral to address the reality of the present point out the disappearance of the profound distinction between the country and the city that marked a fundamental element of the tradition.¹³ While economic and social changes in the wake of the Industrial Revolution have indeed created a different relation between the two scenes of life, and consequently undermined what is usually understood as the fundamental contrast of the tradition, the opposition between the idealised country and the more realistically presented corrupt city or court is not purely a self-contained posture or tactics despite the general acknowledgement of pastoral as discourse. The contrast at the heart of the pastoral eventually points towards more tangible experience with specific references to the present situation that forms the context of the work. The convention of the pastoral requires the stylised representation of the country and the city (or the court), yet these stylised elements point to more immediate aspects and

⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-78* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1980), 176

⁸ Gifford, *Pastoral*, 46

⁹ Gifford, *Pastoral*, 81

¹⁰ cf. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1964)), 5-33

¹¹ Gifford, *Pastoral*, 46

¹² cf. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 22

¹³ cf. Gifford, *Pastoral*, 3

facets of the contemporary situation. Accordingly, the motif of an idyllic past state that stands in contrast with the present is an expression of the threat of disruption for what is considered normal life, and the elements of retreat and return also point beyond their immediately presented content, reinforcing the importance of the need to acknowledge the pastoral as discourse with its assets as well as limitations that stem from that status.

The motif of the journey is a recurrent one in the poetry of John Montague. The destination is principally the physical location of the poet's childhood and as that location is the country, the association with the pastoral is almost natural. These journeys are in effect returns as far as the spatial dimension is concerned, but the inevitable temporal element will transform them into attempts to return rather than successfully accomplished reunion with the targeted experience. Montague's speaker becomes conscious of the discontinuity between the recollected past and the currently experienced present (which present is especially complicated by the more recent political history of the place), thus the place as a potential present elsewhere that could represent the usual pastoral motif of retreat is questioned practically from the outset. Yet this temporal discontinuity facilitates another element of the pastoral, that of the concept of an earlier Golden Age; however, Montague's own personal experience of country life in that particular recollected period undermines this as a strategic possibility. Moreover, Montague's basis of reference is his own childhood, therefore a complex of tangible memories and direct experience, as opposed to the generally more distant period of idealised existence that forms a part of the tradition. His detailed recollections of the past are occasionally vivid evocations but benefitting from the perspective of hindsight he remains objective regarding the realities of deprivation and toil involved in that past, which eventually displays a strong tendency towards balancing the pastoral implications with the anti-pastoral or even confessing to a dominance of the latter.

When considering the physical location of Montague's returns, the specific nature of that contested territory should also be borne in mind. While Donna L. Potts claims the persistence of contemporary Irish writers to idealise the landscape as part of the postcolonial scene,¹⁴ Montague's landscapes are not idealised but actual ones observed in their tangible and often unattractive details. The historical heritage, however, is a strong presence both in terms of the communal as well as the individual scales, which triggers a shift in the poems towards the tactics of focusing on characters, rather than on the landscape, on several occasions. These characters are seen as the repositories of the recollected old world as he contemplates the altered country of his childhood, the landscape only serves as the stimulus to conjure the vision of the past that is eventually embodied in the characters via metonymic transfer which in turn throws light on the change that affects the place itself. Montague's country, consequently, is not simply a landscape or a rural area but a complex cosmos

¹⁴ cf. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition*, 10

with characters as its most emphatic elements, with an apparently mutual relationship between people and place. Moreover, his country is not presented in contrast with the urban world but as a place that is self-defining, it exists on its own right and not in opposition to an elsewhere. The attempted returns are journeys in time rather than in space, and their locations are functions of time rather than parts of a synchronous matrix of places. Thus these locations do not represent the typical pastoral retreat since they are inaccessible due to the temporal gap, yet when seen as memories they are not an alternative either but the very location of the poet's actual upbringing, presented in accurate detail predominantly uncoloured by nostalgia. Neither space, nor time are handled in the manner in which pastoral discourse would require them to be handled, and while elements associated with the pastoral tradition are present in the poetry, it still does not become pastoral poetry despite its close focus on the country.

The early poem entitled "The Water Carrier" epitomises Montague's initial approach to the type of experience that is associated with the pastoral. The rather matter-of-fact declaration of the daily routine quickly moves on to the presentation of the scene of getting water, providing an accurate catalogue of details. Although the image of water is especially potent, given its general significance as a motif, the account incorporates less attractive elements as well, as the water itself is "rust-tinged",¹⁵ there is a "broken drain-pipe, // Corroded wafer thin with rust",¹⁶ and the path leading to the river includes "slime-topped stones / With corners abraded as bleakly white as bones".¹⁷ The recollected experience is eventually memorable but not idyllic as the feel of water against the skin is like "manacles of ice"¹⁸ and "the musty spell of unpicked berries"¹⁹ creates a sense of "heavy greenness",²⁰ an oppressive abundance of nature, recalling the encroaching wild nature that is seen as a threat for the pastoral idyll in general.²¹ The speaker asserts, "Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylize it"²² but the experience eludes him and refuses to become a purely aesthetic construct. Instead, the memory retains its link to actual experience:

I sometimes come to take the water there,
Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing,
Some living source, half-imagined and half-real,

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.²³

¹⁵ John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1995), 189

¹⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

¹⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

¹⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

¹⁹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

²⁰ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

²¹ cf. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 22

²² Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

²³ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 189

The explicit denial of return in relation to the function of the place suggests an inherent significance to it, thus establishing it not as an elsewhere to another place which is sought for as an alternative but something in its own right, a self-contained and self-defining entity. Yet at the same time it retains a degree of mystery for its "half-imagined and half-real" nature as well as by its link to that "fictive water" felt by the speaker as inspiration, which in turn also leaves the focus of the word "there" ambiguous as to its being the actual location or the mental construct of the recalled experience. The scene thus grows beyond its initial appeal, and while it is capable of evoking the pastoral by its situation, it still denies becoming a pastoral in the end.

While the original motif of revisiting the spring in "The Water Carrier" is only based in an imaginative exercise, the collection *The Rough Field* was inspired by an actual physical journey to the scene of the poet's childhood. While exploring the tragic "historical destiny"²⁴ of his home area, Montague exposes various aspects and elements of change that eventually produce a deep sense of temporal discontinuity even on the relatively constrained time scale of his own experience. The return to the place of his formative childhood years does not become a pastoral retreat as the location is only spatially identical with that of his past but the omnipresence of change has turned it into an altogether different world where he finds no possibility of return to the familiar experience he associates with the location. The elegiac becomes the dominant tone of the collection as a result, and the elements of the pastoral are embedded in that mode as important yet still subordinate details to the overall observation of change.

The first, only numbered but not titled, section describing the bus ride from Belfast to Garvaghey follows the pastoral pattern from urban to rural with a properly synchronous pair of locations. The selected details of the city evoke a rather menacing and claustrophobic location which sets up the expectation of a projected contrasting destination, and the "fringe of trees"²⁵ signalling the suburban zone already provides some relief on the outward journey, anticipating the change suggested by the place of departure. While this sets up the proper pastoral frame for the vision to be presented, any such implication is quickly discarded: darkness falls along the way and the place of arrival, "a gaunt farmhouse"²⁶ is recollected rather than seen in the absence of light. The likewise recollected unattractive features of the surroundings dispel the potential illusions that the landscape could raise, made more emphatic by an explicit reference to Wordsworth:

No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here
With glint of glacial corrie, totemic mountain,

²⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 5

²⁵ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 8

²⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

But merging low hills and gravel streams,
 Oozy blackness of bog-banks, tough upland grass;
 Rough Field in the Gaelic and rightly named
 As setting for a life that passes on²⁷

The glacial origin of the landforms creates an overall “harsh landscape”²⁸ that refuses any possible pastoral association by virtue of its status as untamed and untameable nature, and the account concludes with the speaker’s admittance of his inability to reconnect with his previous experience of the place.

This first poem of the collection opens a section entitled “Home Again” and it establishes the structural foundation of the work as the untitled first poem already sums up the conclusion of his finding by pointing out the change that will eventually deny his intention of reconnecting with the place in spite of his origins in it. The return with the supposed intimacy, wished for in the title of the section as well, “[w]here I assume old ways of walk and work / So easily”,²⁹ already incorporates the element of awareness that change is present, it is a place that “seems still, though changing”,³⁰ which in turn will compel the speaker to conclude the poem with the admittance of his frustration, “With all my circling a failure to return.”³¹ Although this final line offers a multiplicity of readings if seen against the poet’s biography, the denial of a pastoral retreat is explicit in all the possible variations. However, the subsequent, still only numbered but not titled, passages represent further attempts “to rekindle / That once leaping fire”,³² making a reference to the innocence of memories and recalling family history with the help of an old daguerreotype, yet these will only foreground change with the irrecoverable loss of the old world.

The concluding piece of the first section, “Like Dolmens Round My Childhood...” is the key to the whole collection in terms of its pastoral elements. The poem is in effect a catalogue of figures from the time of the poet’s childhood, and these characters represent that rural agricultural population that is understood as the typical pastoral society. The opening assertion and the portraits, however, construct the image of a predominantly harsh world, referred to by Douglas Sealy as “what might be called the borders of civilisation”,³³ where deprivation is the most salient feature and the internal relations within that society are marred by gossip and prejudice, which eventually undermines the possibility of an idyllic pastoral parallel. While Montague mitigates these conditions by presenting details raising sympathy for the respective character, the reconstructed picture essentially refutes idealisation in spite of the

²⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

²⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

²⁹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

³⁰ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

³¹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 9

³² Montague, *Collected Poems*, 10

³³ Douglas Sealy, “The Sound of a Wound: An Introduction to the Poetry of John Montague from 1958 to 1988.” *Irish University Review*, Spring 1989, Vol. 19. No. 1, 11

humane perspective of the speaker. The closure of the poem retains the ambivalence present in the descriptions:

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass

Into that dark permanence of ancient forms.³⁴

It is only that mysterious change in the status of the recollected characters that can render them less menacing for the speaker yet the ambiguity persists at the end since they are still seen as shadows and the "ancient forms" are not assessed from the point of view of their actual effect on the spectator. While the word "bedside" can also hint at several possible ideas, it is eventually associated with passing, and the conditions surrounding it are inclined towards a hostile environment rather than a nurturing one. The syntactic ambiguity of the line "Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud" reflects the dilemma of the speaker regarding the compelling forces of that particular world, since it is not clear whether the word "fierceness" has only "family" as a postmodifier in the line and in a similar manner "feud" may have not only "local" as its premodifier in that context. Although "fear" is counterbalanced by "friendliness", the speaker's assessment of his recollected childhood world appears dominated more by the former, and the overall impression of his reconstructed gallery of these rural characters is a credible portrayal of the old world but it rejects the pastoral association.

The poem "The Road's End" provides an explicit focus on change as the speaker is engaged in an exercise of contrastive observation during his walk: "As I take / The mountain road, my former step / Doubles mine".³⁵ The poem is on one level an echo of "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood..." as in its final section the same characters are mentioned as the former inhabitants of the now deserted dwellings but the principal concern is change itself as the speaker contemplates the present scenery. Although there is growth observed in the form of extension added to an old farmhouse, change manifests as decay and loss:

Like shards
Of a lost culture, the slopes
Are strewn with cabins, deserted
In my lifetime.³⁶

³⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 13

³⁵ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 31

³⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 32

This loss transcends its actual scope as the timescale is reduced to an individual's lifetime, severely contracted when seen against large-scale historical phenomena – albeit what is pointed at by the speaker is the final phase of a longer process, yet it is undoubtedly the irreversible and irrecoverable one. The individual acquaintances also become more emblematic as they are elevated to the status of the final representatives of a culture, only recognised as such with hindsight, and the gesture of the speaker's naming them renders their passing and loss a more immediately tangible experience by the personal relevance they acquire by being individualised.

The next poem of the collection enlarges this image of scattering and disappearance into a more encompassing phenomenon. The opening line, "All around, shards of a lost tradition"³⁷, expands the focus on the linguistic loss in the wake of the colonial period through the place names of the region. The colonial renaming of the countryside leads to the cultural displacement of the local population: "The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read".³⁸ Although the context is postcolonial, this statement carries a potent reference to the pastoral tradition as well, especially with the closing image of the poem in which the end of the O'Neill rising is identified as a moment of defeat to nature, rather than being subdued by the coloniser's army, "As Ulster's pride, Elizabeth's foeman / Founder in a Munster bog."³⁹

The collection includes some more moments of recollection with pastoral implications. The poem "The Fight" recalls a childhood discovery of swallow's eggs in which the initial excitement of the finding turns into a bitter fight between the speaker and his schoolmate who destroys the eggs while the speaker turns his back. The temporal distance between the recollected experience and the time of recollection now allows the speaker a change of perspective, and the shift from innocence to experience ultimately leads to a recognition that bears a broader relevance than that of the episode only:

To worship or destroy beauty –
That double edge of impulse
I recognise, by which we live;
But also the bitter paradox
Of betraying love to harm,
Then lungeing, too late,
With fists, to its defence.⁴⁰

Montague's exploration of the current state of his childhood place testifies to the practical experience of this conclusion and on a more general level it comments on the pastoral as well. The pastoral is recognised as a belated and

³⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 33

³⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 33

³⁹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 33

⁴⁰ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 48

therefore utopian discourse which tends towards the elegiac as a result and as such it maintains its fictional relevance from within that tradition by which gesture it acknowledges its nature as a literary construct lacking proper contact with the actual.

Redeeming moments, however, are still possible but they come in only specific circumstances, as indicated in the poem entitled "The Source." Recalling an experience after a long evening of drinking, the poem is an account of a homeward walk in nearly total darkness in which only smells and sounds are properly discernible and which favours the recollection of childhood events as a result of the lack of proper visual stimuli. The overall experience is the closest to the ideal pastoral Montague can get as the memories give him a "mood of fierce elation"⁴¹ and he is in possession of a vision extraordinary:

My seven league boots devour
Time and space as I crash
Through the last pools of
Darkness. All around, my
Neighbours sleep, but I am
In possession of their past
(The pattern history weaves
From one small backward place)
Marching through memory magnified:
Each grassblade bends with
Translucent beads of moisture
And the bird of total meaning
Stirs upon its hidden branch.⁴²

This moment approximates the concept of pastoral retreat and subsequent return the most as the vision is one of insight, although the speaker does not specify its scope. Yet this vision emerges in a specific state for the speaker, he has "[t]hat extra pilot in the head"⁴³ during his walk, and that eventually endows the title of the poem with ambiguity as it can refer to the literal source of the stream and/or the metaphorical source of the vision and feelings in the altered mental state of drunkenness.

The final section of the collection is the explicit refusal of idealising what has been contemplated and it thus marks the ultimate rejection of the pastoral as a framework for Montague's attempted return. The past is not regarded as a viable alternative as soon as an objective point of view is applied: "Only a sentimentalist would wish / to see such degradation again".⁴⁴ Despite all the deprivation of the old world there is an acknowledgment of some form of loss

⁴¹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 51

⁴² Montague, *Collected Poems*, 51-52

⁴³ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 52

⁴⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 80

as the speaker asserts “Yet something mourns.”⁴⁵ The laconic sentence eventually leads to a conclusion that elevates the practices of farm life to something emblematic as “action had been wrung / through painstaking years to ritual.”⁴⁶ This, however, does not mitigate the fact of change in which one can only acknowledge what is gone as “Our finally lost dream of man at home / in a rural setting”,⁴⁷ and the explicit labelling of the concept as a “dream” is a clear-cut verdict on the pastoral as to its relevance to assess genuine experience. The past recalled in the poems of the collection is not the Golden Age of the tradition, nor is there a specified context to return to in which the country would feature as the elsewhere of pastoral retreat, and the conclusion is only the repeated acknowledgement of change, no longer a threat for the future but the reality of the present.

While *The Rough Field* presents the frame of a willed attempt to return, the later collection entitled *The Dead Kingdom* is only an accidental one as it is occasioned by the death of the poet’s mother. The motivation is thus different as it is the northward journey including stations on the way which have pastoral associations, and accordingly there is a less systematic involvement of the tradition in this collection as a whole. A delicate shift is observable in Montague’s treatment of the pastoral: while he remains sceptical about its potential as a meaningful retreat, his presentation of the recalled memories includes several cherished moments which are connected with natural scenes without human interference. This indicates an increasing awareness of the self-contained existence of nature which eventually works towards the further strengthening of Montague’s scepticism towards the pastoral as adequate representation of actual human experience.

In the poem entitled “A Murmuring Stream” the Midlands of “wartime summers”⁴⁸ is recalled as a “sluggish, forgotten world”.⁴⁹ The reflective speaker asserts this from the perspective of the present, yet the selection of the presented memories gives a picture of apparently careless innocence that alludes to the Wordsworthian type. The poem “Abbeylara” maintains this view as the speaker recalls that “In the garden at Abbeylara / it was always summer”⁵⁰ and “In the house at Abbeylara / it was always busy and warm”.⁵¹ While this account suggests a private Golden Age, these memories include only summer experiences of the place and are thus by no means all-encompassing of the whole scale of rural life. The present state of the no longer inhabited house brings back the objective perspective as the neglected building and the overgrown garden provide a stark contrast with the orderly past memories that are displayed. The conclusion of the poem is clearly elegiac in pointing to the ultimate futility of

⁴⁵ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 80

⁴⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 80

⁴⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 81

⁴⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 129

⁴⁹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 129

⁵⁰ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 131

⁵¹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 131

the human enterprise of imposing permanent order on the natural world as the former presence of the inhabitants of the house is almost completely erased after their deaths "as if they had never been."⁵² While this may evoke the concept of a former Golden Age, the complete disappearance of that earlier world makes its existence as pure fiction that stems from its role in the pastoral as discourse even more apparent.

While the conclusion of "Abbeylara" represents the return of nature following the departure of people, "Red Island" presents a facet of nature with an altogether different power. The opening line, "Time could stop here"⁵³ signals an almost perfect example of the pastoral ideal of retreat at first but the ambiguity of the temporal reference of "could" already destabilises the context and the description that follows contains several elements that subvert this ideal. The place is ultimately one of nature existing independently of human presence, a world ruled by the drive of survival and elementary instincts, representing the untamed world that lies beyond the orderly country of the pastoral. While this place offers an escape for the intruding humans, as the recalled memory suggests, the final section of the poem shifts back from the past to the present tense, suggesting a fresh experience. It is this experience that juxtaposes the ideal with the actual: while the speaker and his companion "stretch in the grass / to water's lulling murmur"⁵⁴ and thus enjoy what is considered tranquillity, he recognises and admits to, benefitting from his present perspective, the reality of "this deep, drowned land"⁵⁵ as eventually a "watery graveyard".⁵⁶

Despite Montague's treatment of the country showing such subtle alterations, his approach to characters inhabiting that old world remains the same as in *The Rough Field*. In the poem "The Music Box" such a character is recalled with vivid details of her physical deformity and simple conditions, and the speaker's present recollection now admits his embarrassment at his childish tactics of having mocked her in a rather cruel manner. Although she is likened to "some toothy witch"⁵⁷, her treasure of the music box would attract the curious children and they would willingly accept the sweets offered as invitation. Similarly to the technique employed in "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood..." the speaker's account is built on the benefit of hindsight, as it is the adult speaker who is capable of understanding the menace of a lonely life in harsh conditions, and his present act of commemoration is offered as a belated apology and compensation for his earlier rude behaviour. There is, however, an intriguing element in this act as the speaker identifies the music box and its magic as the fundamental cause of his remembering her, the ambivalence of which he eventually attempts to mitigate by the conclusion of the

⁵² Montague, *Collected Poems*, 131

⁵³ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 140

⁵⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 141

⁵⁵ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 141

⁵⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 141

⁵⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 145

poem, where the scattered and simplified syntactic units of the final sentence represent that altered and final state that results after her passing: “A silver / dancer stops. Silent. Motionless.”⁵⁸ The broken text implies a sense of loss yet what has been lost is not seen as a desirable idyllic pastoral alternative.

The much later collection *Smashing the Piano* (2001) contains some poems that recollect childhood episodes the context of which is already presented in earlier volumes. These later poems employ a different tactics and thus seem to have a closer affinity with the pastoral tradition. These poems, however, are reminiscent of snapshots and stills and they function as self-contained lyric pieces rather than becoming parts of a systematically constructed pattern based on the concept of the pastoral retreat. The poem “Paths” presents the two gardens of the farm of the speaker’s childhood, one for flowers and another for vegetables, “Two gardens, the front / for beauty, the back / for use.”⁵⁹ While the former is accordingly a scene of peace, the description of the latter includes the stink of the goat shack as well as the danger presented by cats and foxes. The recalled scene now functions as some form of retreat although it is not a willed one as the memory emerges for a sleepless speaker. The next poem of the collection, entitled “Within”, expands and transforms the flower garden image into a magic one where the usual calls and orders are not heard and which embodies the ideal of a garden suspended in time that could be considered as the par excellence pastoral retreat. The image, however, remains an imaginary one as it is “[c]hildhood dreams”⁶⁰ that yield it and not actual experience recollected though coloured by the falsifying tendency of memory, which eventually suggests that the ultimate pastoral vision of a timeless idyll is indeed only a fiction.

While John Montague employs elements associated with the pastoral tradition in many of his poems, he does not embrace the tradition as a whole in a systematic manner as a fundamental structural principle governing the poems. His frequently employed return-motif relies on memories of his childhood spent in the country, a location that could be interpreted as a proper pastoral retreat, but as it features not in contrast with a contemporary urban location it does not fulfil this role. The presentation of the past works against the other aspect of a pastoral framework as it denies the possibility of regarding that recollected world as an idyllic Golden Age. While the poems include instances of the pastoral, these principally function as a means for the elegiac approach that Montague takes when contemplating the past. The emphasis eventually lies on the observation of change when the past and the present are contrasted. It is the loss of this distinctiveness that becomes the object of mourning in the wake of the transformation of the country into what appears to be a generic modern rural environment without any distinctively local flavour. Despite the sense of loss observed, the contrast of the present

⁵⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 146

⁵⁹ John Montague, *Smashing the Piano*, (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2001), 12

⁶⁰ Montague, *Smashing the Piano*, 13

with the past does not create an idealised vision of the past as a lost pastoral world of idyllic nature. The past is recalled, in spite of the falsifying tendency of memory, in its objective entirety comprising not only of pleasurable and nurturing moments but of hardship and deprivation as well. These accounts are balanced at most, with an occasional tendency towards the anti-pastoral, which in the final analysis basically formulates a critique of the pastoral *per se* and at once suggests an even more pervasive sense of loss by refusing to idealise the past experience that would be the conventional foundation of the pastoral tradition itself. In the later poetry of Montague there is a different use of the past in self-contained lyric pieces offering glimpses of the recalled experience. However, the balanced mode of presentation is retained, which in the end maintains the poet's overall critique of the tradition as one that fails to offer a credible and acceptable representation of proper lived experience.

Where Montague finds the pastoral inadequate is its fiction of a retrospectively idealised earlier position. The world of the good place is essentially created by nostalgic reduction with a hint of the falsifying propensity of memory in its attempt of preserving the past. The pastoral responds to a particular situation with the tools of a convention that involves a generalising tendency, and it is this element that is understood as its limitation. The stylisation of experience, while insisting on its nature as a self-consciously literary manoeuvre, involves the danger of simplifying and reducing the complexity of the representation of the particular situation it focuses on. It is this recognition that prompts Montague to balance the pastoral with the anti-pastoral in his essentially elegiac approach, making him an elegist rather than a pastoralist, albeit an elegist with a strong tendency to rely on the pastoral with its potential yet with an acute awareness of its pitfalls and limitations of objective representation.

Heaney's Glanmores – Almost Pastoral (?)

Seamus Heaney's move in 1972 from his position as a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast to become a freelance writer with a residence in County Wicklow in the Republic marked a change that would represent the beginning of a new phase of life for the poet in several ways. Michael Parker provides a comprehensive assessment of the motives for Heaney's move based on the poet's own accounts, and the list includes professional development and economic concerns as well as a need for an environment different from that of Belfast, which motive would, in hindsight, also receive the political dimension of deliberate distancing from what Northern Ireland constituted as a political formation.¹ Although the political aspect is prominent in several responses to Heaney's move, the fact that he chose a secluded rural location for his new residence implies a need to establish a new beginning which, in spite of its anticipation of difference, is at once a return to a world of familiar experience that could provide a reassuring counterpoint to the challenge of a new life. As Parker notes, "[h]is choice of rural Wicklow reveals a longing for a simpler, less frenetic, perhaps more *Irish* way of life."² Heaney left Northern Ireland in the worst year of the Troubles, and moved to a location that would offer him a vantage point complex enough to present the possibility of distance for contemplating the events of his native place as well as provide him with stimuli of a different kind. Glanmore was a place that could allow for a new departure and at once re-establish his earlier relation with the rural world akin to that of his upbringing.

The place, however, did not immediately enter into his poetry. Heaney moved to Glanmore in 1972, and while the closing piece of the volume *North* (1975) explicitly mentioned the location of its composition in Wicklow, it was only in *Field Work* (1979) that poems exploring the Glanmore experience appeared – by which time the poet had been a resident of Dublin for three years, having moved there from the seclusion of the cottage for practical reasons. The poems reflecting on his time in the cottage are thus results of more sustained contemplation rather than unmediated records of immediate experience, yet they would inevitably bring back the implications of pastoral poetry, especially with the careful placing of the sequence "Glanmore Sonnets" in the volume in a central position.

¹ cf. Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 119-120

² Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 119

Heaney's poetry was associated with the pastoral from his earliest volume *Death of a Naturalist* due to the collection's focus on the rural environment that would provide not only the setting but the subject matter of the poems as well. Although Blake Morrison would term these early poems "examples of post-1945 nature poetry",³ referring to the rather unsatisfactory nature of that term and acknowledging a massive influence of Ted Hughes on the approach discernible in the poems,⁴ they may easily be included in a more broadly conceived view of the pastoral tradition which incorporates the anti-pastoral as well. While the relation of the anti-pastoral to the pastoral is a matter of critical debates, including views of contrasting the terms as well as seeing them as inseparably identical,⁵ Heaney's own account clearly sets the two apart: "the idealised landscape with contented figures, the garden, the harmonious estate" represent the pastoral, whereas in the anti-pastoral "sweat and pain and deprivation are acknowledged."⁶ Bernard O'Donoghue provides an even broader range of possible terms to describe Heaney's use of the pastoral as his list includes "pastoral, anti-pastoral, bucolic, eclogue, Doric",⁷ yet his poles of assessment are eventually those of Heaney's own distinction, even if he opts for the use of the term "bucolic" as a general one to include both. Considered in this way, Heaney's early poetry is neither strictly pastoral nor anti-pastoral but an approximately balanced blend of the two, and his later poems would follow a similar pattern in never fully converging to either of the two poles. His recurrent use of the Glanmore motif in different phases of his poetic career testifies to a conviction of an objective and balanced representation of the country, based in actual personal experience, in which pastoral and anti-pastoral dimensions are simultaneously present, yet Heaney does not create a post-pastoral position in which the tension between these two would find a resolution in a self-consciously established new perspective.

The sequence entitled "Glanmore Sonnets" is placed right in the middle of the volume *Field Work*, a collection that represented a marked change in Heaney's poetry both in terms of forms and his approach to the Northern situation. Daniel Tobin refers to the sequence as the "still point" of the collection as he notes the symmetrical structure of the book.⁸ Michael Parker considers the poems as Heaney's celebration of his wife and their cottage,⁹ and Helen Vendler even calls the sequence a "marriage-group".¹⁰ The dimension

³ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, (London, Methuen, 1982), 17

⁴ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 17-18

⁵ cf. Jonathan Allison, "Kavanagh and the antipastoral". In: Campbell, Matthew (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42; Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 4

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-78* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1980), 176

⁷ Bernard O'Donoghue, "Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic," in: Bernard O'Donoghue (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 106

⁸ Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center. Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 146

⁹ Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 152

¹⁰ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 66

of domesticity is explicitly acknowledged as Vendler labels the place a “domestic retreat” which could enable the poet to “create a new hard-edged form of pastoral.”¹¹ Michael Cavanagh also sees the move to Glanmore as part of Heaney’s intention to strive toward “a downscaled, though not plain, art”¹² that is apparently related to his earlier poetic grounding. Elmer Andrews likewise notes this intention of “a conscious scaling-down of Heaney’s vision”¹³ at the time and highlights his reconnection with his earliest work through the analogies between poetry and ploughing in the first two poems of the Glanmore sequence.¹⁴ The choice of the sonnet form for assessing the experience yielded by the new location is also noted as a significant artistic gesture on part of Heaney: Andrews focuses on the parallel between the “highly disciplined sonnet form” and “the ploughman’s steady, careful movement”,¹⁵ while Parker sees it as a “desire to re-establish the ‘old values’ of order, harmony, and lyric ceremony in his work”,¹⁶ a concern also noted by Tobin, who claims that “[the] sonnet form itself suggests trust in art, a stark contrast to the disfigured poems of *North*.”¹⁷

Heaney claimed in an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll that “Glanmore was the first place where my immediate experience got into my work. Almost all the poems before that had arisen from memories of older haunts.”¹⁸ Yet while “Exposure” indeed begins with a reference to the Wicklow setting of composition, the poems dealing in depth with the experience of living in Glanmore were published several years after Heaney’s residence in the cottage, which eventually suggests a longer span of reflection and a necessary recourse to memory as a basis. Heaney’s decision to place the Glanmore sequence at the halfway point of *Field Work* is also indicative of his larger scheme of situating the poems in a specific relation with the rest of the volume: Bernard O’Donoghue regards the sonnets as products of “a hoped-for age of innocence” but also remarks that they represent a contrast with some poems already from within that volume.¹⁹ This arrangement, coupled with the sonnet form and the literary allusions, especially those to Wordsworth, reflect an intention of turning the sequence into an attempt at some form of modern pastoral, a self-contained unit with its own internal dynamics that is also at once a part of the larger pattern of the volume, which in turn also indicates what Terry Gifford identifies as a requirement of the pastoral, the necessity of

¹¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 67

¹² Michael Cavanagh, *Professing Poetry. Seamus Heaney’s Poetics* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 131

¹³ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney. All the Realms of Whisper* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 116

¹⁴ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 118

¹⁵ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 118

¹⁶ Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 167

¹⁷ Tobin, *Passage to the Center*, 155.

¹⁸ Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones. Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (EPUB ed. Faber, 2009), Ch. 7, par. 20

¹⁹ Bernard O’Donoghue, “Heaney’s Classics and the Bucolic,” in: Bernard O’Donoghue (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 117

a contrast of locations and consequently contexts since the experience gained in a pastoral retreat needs to be interpreted in the context of a return to the point of departure: “there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood.”²⁰

The poems constitute what Vendler terms “a deliberately middle-voiced Wordsworthian sequence”, composed of “poems which [Heaney] hopes will ‘continue, hold, dispel, appease.’”²¹ Parker refers to the poems as “epiphanies”, made possible by the place itself with its very simple conditions complemented by the presence of abundant nature, recalling Heaney’s childhood environment.²² As the location offered the possibility of setting his own rhythm of life, the poet was reconnected to his sense of a more elemental pattern, that of “planetary, biological reality”²³, which would promptly direct the poetic approach towards the pastoral. Heaney himself acknowledged Glanmore as a retreat in more senses than one,²⁴ noting the contrast between the experience it facilitated and experience he exchanged it for, thus the cottage came to embody the notion of pastoral retreat – all the more so in the light of Heaney’s later move back to the urban world and the fact that the poems gained their final forms after his return. While the sonnets indeed abound in elements of the pastoral tradition that have the potential of transforming Glanmore into the ideal embodiment of pastoral retreat, the sequence also contains motifs and moments which function as checks and balances as they represent the anti-pastoral dimension, thus the place is shown in a matrix of vision and observation, with potential and limitation simultaneously constituting its eventually balanced literary realisation.

Although the title of the sequence is “Glanmore Sonnets”, the poems do not strictly conform to any of the usual established sonnet types. Neither the consistency of line lengths, nor the rhyme schemes fall within the usual categories of Petrarchan, Shakespearean or even Spenserian. The poems show a considerable variety in terms of rhyme patterns as well as rhyme types, and several line configurations go unrhymed. While the 14-line pattern is observed, the departure from the usual neat arrangements and structures associated with sonnets is also an indication of the refusal of a fully harmonious picture as the adequate representation of the place, which in turn is also an expression of the distrust of the discourse of the pastoral in its traditional form. Heaney employs the sonnet form but he creates his own patterns for it, reflecting his approach to the tradition in which the poems are to be situated.

²⁰ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 81

²¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 66

²² Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 166

²³ Heaney quoted in Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 166

²⁴ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, Ch. 7, par. 38

The opening of the first sonnet already embodies that dichotomy that characterises the whole sequence. The line “Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground”²⁵ suggests a sense of a new beginning which is at once loaded with multiple connections to Heaney’s earlier poetry. Although the line concludes with a full stop to mark its completeness in itself, the reference of the word “other” retains its indefiniteness as a result of the colon that follows it, thus the sentence carries a range of possible directions for meaning. The farming analogy establishes a connection with Heaney’s earliest poems, most notably “Digging” and “Follower”, whereas “opened ground” may hark back to the world of *North*, with the heavily political agenda of the volume also hinted at. The image of ploughing, however, implies an opening only of the upper layer of the soil, there is no suggestion of the subsoil or the bedrock which could relate to Heaney’s earlier trope of downward exploration. Moreover, the farming analogy suggests possibility and points towards the future rather than backwards to the past, endowing the image with a novel reference and significance within the poet’s practice. “The mildest February for twenty years”²⁶ underlies the special nature of the occasion as the unique weather offers a potential for something new or newly returned to for the speaker as the relation of the time period to the individual’s lifespan implies. The field prepared for agricultural work opens a parallel with potential territory for poetry and the poem becomes an emblem of the new beginning the location facilitates, a new beginning which is at once a type of return to already familiar practice. The picture, however, is not an idyllic pastoral one as the time is still winter with “mist bands over furrows”,²⁷ and the “deep no sound” of the land is “Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors”.²⁸ The images of the steaming road and breathing soil indicate the rebirth of the land, yet they are also reminders of the separate life of the physical environment which is governed by natural laws, independent of human action. The speaker’s contemplation blends into a vision of ghosts in the end, recalling his memories of farming rituals, yet the closing line, “The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snow”,²⁹ presents an image that unsettles what could approximate a perfect pastoral vision principally due to the use of the word “freakish”.

As the first sonnet already indicates, the sequence is also self-consciously concerned with poetry itself. The second sonnet begins with a more explicit expression of the possibilities of art than those outlined in the first poem, providing a more concrete focus for the image of the “opened ground” introduced in the previous poem. The moments evoked in the opening lines of the second poem are those of inspiration, with an analogy taken from the sculptor’s idea of the perfect conditions for creation:

²⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), 33

²⁶ Heaney, *Field Work*, 33

²⁷ Heaney, *Field Work*, 33

²⁸ Heaney, *Field Work*, 33

²⁹ Heaney, *Field Work*, 33

‘These things are not secrets but mysteries,’
 Oisín Kelly told me years ago
 In Belfast, hankering after stone
 That connived with the chisel, as if the grain
 Remembered what the mallet tapped to know.³⁰

Emblematically this idea is recollected from the time of a Belfast conversation, so the juxtaposition with the “hedge-school of Glanmore”³¹ offers more than one sense of contrast: what was only longed-for in the modern and urban North becomes a probability in the simple and rural location in the South. Heaney’s phrase of the “hedge-school” also hints at a more elementary source of gaining knowledge yet none the less profound for it, intimating the possibility of the “ideal union of art and life”³² which offers an even more persuasive pastoral image expressed in the closing lines of the poem: “Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round.”³³ The act of repeating the first line of the opening sonnet is emblematic of the assertion of the last line itself as Heaney eventually alters the punctuation in the repeated line: both the colon and the final full stop are replaced by commas, suggesting not only a more fluid type of movement but a seamless analogy with the result of farming work. Yet these two lines also contain their dimension of alertness: while they apparently contrast with the tentative “might” of the speaker’s hope of finding the ideal art, the use of only non-finite verb forms deny these two lines the possibility of becoming self-contained standard sentences on their own right.

The observation of wildlife in the third sonnet represents a different kind of attempt at the pastoral from the approach of the preceding two poems. The conflation of the birdsong and poetic rhythm is an extension of the ploughing and poetry parallel, but the sight of the rabbit and deer seen from within the cottage distances the observer from the observed. The position of the “strange loneliness”³⁴ of the speaker is challenged by this intrusion of the stimuli of the outside world, leading to a hint at a parallel with the Wordsworths, although it is the wife who refers explicitly to the comparison by her response of rejection of that parallel. The tension arising from the act of rejection is mitigated by the closing image of the wind as “Outside a rustling and twig-combing breeze / Refreshes and relents. Is cadences.”³⁵ The poem is thus framed by a form of correspondence between the sounds of the outside world and the sonic order of poetry, supporting the possible creation of a pastoral atmosphere, yet the speaker’s allusion prompted by his observation of the external

³⁰ Heaney, *Field Work*, 34

³¹ Heaney, *Field Work*, 34

³² Tobin, *Passage to the Center*, 157

³³ Heaney, *Field Work*, 34

³⁴ Heaney, *Field Work*, 35

³⁵ Heaney, *Field Work*, 35

stimulus of the surrounding natural world causes domestic tension whereby it undermines the pastoral potential of the scene.

The next three sonnets of the sequence are poems of retrospect instead of focusing on current experience although their *apropos* derives from the similarity of the surroundings in Heaney's estimate. Sonnet IV grows out of the childhood aspiration of hearing the arrival of the train in advance through the power of sound communicated by the rails themselves. While the exercise of catching that sound remains fruitless, other stimuli eventually reach the speaker. The word "line" opens the connection to poetry and the rather modest reward of the speaker's patient exercise of listening suggests the limited possibilities and range of poetic inspiration in that particular rural environment. The fifth poem outlines a linguistic passage from innocence to experience as the dialect word "boortree" is replaced by the learned one of "elderberry". While the childhood term expresses a wide range of fulfilling sensory experience, the learned expression remains a reference to a distant fiction. As "[b]oortree is bower tree, where I played 'touching tongues'",³⁶ a different kind of passage opens through the word "tongue": the shift in meaning from the physical reference to language and etymology indicates a special path as if exploration of the physical sense of a different texture on the tongue would transform into linguistic exploration for the poet later. The poem closes with speaker's tentative return to the original experience as he re-enacts the "crouching" of his childhood practice. This is where the poem approximates the idea of pastoral the most as the present location is considered a retreat – yet the shift to the present tense and the adult's willed-for identification with his recollected experience still indicate the presence of a gap that may eventually deny the fulfilment of his wish.

Sonnet VI begins with an ambiguous subject only referred to as "he" placed in a perfect pastoral environment. The situation presented engenders the resolution "'I will break through,' he said, 'what I glazed over / With perfect mist and peaceful absences'",³⁷ which suggests a strong self-reflexive approach and identifies the subject as himself. The resolution, however, indicates a critique of the pastoral context out of which it is inspired as the "perfect mist" and the "peaceful absences" function as "glazing" which eventually covers and thus hides whatever it is supposed to protect or embellish. The resolution draws inspiration from a recollected childhood story of a man "who dared the ice / And raced his bike across the Moyola River"³⁸ – yet the episode remains a mystery as it was done by a "man we never saw."³⁹ The story is recalled from a winter "when the snow / Kept the country bright as a studio",⁴⁰ and had a similar effect at the time to what it is evoked for in the present.

³⁶ Heaney, *Field Work*, 37

³⁷ Heaney, *Field Work*, 38

³⁸ Heaney, *Field Work*, 38

³⁹ Heaney, *Field Work*, 38

⁴⁰ Heaney, *Field Work*, 38

The next poem of the sequence begins with a list of locations which direct the focus back to the present and relate to Heaney's earlier concerns with the broader North. The usual imagery of the harsh world of the North Atlantic and the series of kennings, making also a tacit allusion to the conflict-ridden world of Northern Ireland,⁴¹ stand in sharp contrast with the immediate surroundings of the poet at the time of the composition, "the lee of Wicklow",⁴² which ultimately creates the tension of movement similar to that of Heaney's change of location. The French names of ships in the bay also contrast with the crispier sounding names of the first line of the stanza, which shows a parallel with their having found refuge in the South from the harsh weather of the North, prompting the speaker to say "A haven."⁴³ The word comes to embody a similar phenomenon as the "sensings" and "mountings" of the second sonnet of the sequence, and as it is "deepening, clearing"⁴⁴ it finds its analogy in the sky of some other locations. However, the list of places representing that "elsewhere"⁴⁵ marks a return to the North, which eventually concludes the poem on an ambiguous note as "Minches, Cromarty, the Faroes"⁴⁶ are locations where clear skies represent the less usual occurrence, yet it is exactly this less usual presence that reinforces the retreat-like position of the haven. The poem thus maintains a similar balance characteristic of the other sonnets of the sequence but it does not explicitly employ any element of the usual pastoral stock.

While the concept of haven reinforces those inspiring aspects of Glanmore which the first three sonnets outlined, a consideration of the cottage for its actual physical features complements the picture with less comforting elements. The thunderstorm of Sonnet VIII follows the speaker's thoughts on dew earlier in the day, suggesting a change of quality to the common element of water in the two. Yet the morning contemplation of the speaker was also concerned with "dew on armour and carrion",⁴⁷ and the contrast between the two items already indicates the speaker's reluctance to accept exclusive perspectives. The recalled morning idea and the currently unfolding storm raise the thoughts of that menacing aspect of nature that Heaney's earlier poetry also included:

What would I meet, blood-boltered, on the road?
How deep into the woodpile sat the toad?
What welters through this dark hush on the crops?⁴⁸

⁴¹ cf. Adam Hanna, *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 33-34

⁴² Heaney, *Field Work*, 39

⁴³ Heaney, *Field Work*, 39

⁴⁴ Heaney, *Field Work*, 39

⁴⁵ Heaney, *Field Work*, 39

⁴⁶ Heaney, *Field Work*, 39

⁴⁷ Heaney, *Field Work*, 40

⁴⁸ Heaney, *Field Work*, 40

These concerns are all the more powerful if the speaker's position of being installed in the safety of the house is considered, and the anxiety reflected in the questions prompts the speaker to ask for the comforting company of his wife, hinting at the experience of the threat of isolation, and consequent anxiety, in seclusion.

Sonnet IX details an actual experience of the menace of rural life in the form of a rat that is spotted outside the kitchen window. The speaker's wife demands that he goes out to kill it, which ultimately undermines the pastoral potential of the place, as it is indicated by the frustrated question of "Did we come to the wilderness for this?"⁴⁹ However much the experience of having to deal with pests is familiar for the speaker from his childhood, the current situation is intended to be different from that of farming, the cottage is supposed to serve as retreat and thus inspiration. The compulsion of addressing the problem prompts another question which reflects Heaney's recurring concern with his profession: "What is my apology for poetry?"⁵⁰ While the rat's disappearance eventually dismisses the need for the unwanted action, the episode remains with the speaker and consequently serves as a reminder of the limitations of the potential of the place as an ideal pastoral retreat.

The concluding piece of the sequence, however, makes an attempt of pastoral restoration. What is essentially a "pastoral dream"⁵¹ conflates the speaker and his wife with literary allusions, from Shakespeare at first, then in turn from Celtic myth. The dream then becomes a frame for another dream within it, that of their first night of intimacy, which seemingly provides a harmonious and assuring moment of conclusion. However, the location of the "moss in Donegal"⁵² has its discomfort of drizzle and the literary allusion to the Celtic figures of Diarmuid and Grainne hints at the "aura of tragedy"⁵³. The dream within the dream is a cunning introduction of actual memory, thus the imaginary is replaced by another mental construct, that of a recollected event which has its origin in actual experience yet it is its mental imprint that can be recalled. The final reference to sexual communion also includes the awareness of their "separateness",⁵⁴ which is all the more significant a reminder of the impossibility of absolutes as the context is that of the most personal and intimate form of experience. The concluding poem thus confirms Heaney's approach to the pastoral as presented throughout the sequence as a blend of both pastoral and anti-pastoral elements that create a balanced and objective account rather than an idealised one.

⁴⁹ Heaney, *Field Work*, 41

⁵⁰ Heaney, *Field Work*, 41

⁵¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 68

⁵² Heaney, *Field Work*, 42

⁵³ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 69

⁵⁴ Heaney, *Field Work*, 42

In the volume *Seeing Things* (1991) Heaney returned to the Glanmore motif in the form of another sequence entitled “Glanmore Revisited”. Heaney purchased the cottage from Anne Saddlemeyer in 1988, thus the place could become a proper writing escape for the poet, an elsewhere to withdraw to from his Dublin residence, no longer as a tenant but the owner, which represented a major change compared to the earlier status of Glanmore. The title of the later sequence indicates both physical and reflective return to the cottage, and the change of its status is reflected in the sequence. The individual poems of the later sequence have titles unlike the earlier sequence composed of only numbered sections, and the poems of “Glanmore Revisited” follow the Petrarchan pattern, which is reflected in their typographical layout as well. Michael Parker notes in connection with the general tendency of the poems that they “insist on cataloguing rather than creating effects”,⁵⁵ which is supported by the fact that the sequence does not include memories of another location which could relate the place to an elsewhere to define its significance. The act of revisiting foregrounds the importance of the temporal dimension, the participation of time as a major constituent in the composure of a place.⁵⁶ The time gap between the two sequences is significant not only because of the changes affecting the place itself, physically as well as in terms of its status as possession: the returning poet is different as well, his experience is broader and his poetic focus has also shifted. The poems address the same space but it is observed in a different time by a different subject, which Eugene O’Brien terms the “recontextualisation” of the place.⁵⁷ What remains eventually unchanged, however, is Heaney’s reluctance to fully submit to the pastoral temptation of idealising the place.

The first poem of the sequence, “Scrabble”, begins with short phrases which list items of the cottage, yet the phrases are not extended into proper sentences, which gives the impression of a catalogue. The simple conditions of the interior of the cottage are contrasted with the sense of safety it can provide from the outside world, giving the impression of home. However, there is a sense of ambivalence present resulting partly from the catalogue-like nature of the picture and partly from the speaker’s remark “It felt remembered even then”.⁵⁸ The fire that is not capable of giving the proper sense of warmth challenges the notion of the “hearth-blaze”⁵⁹ as the traditional centre of the house, thus the idyllic notion of a pastoral retreat is undermined, and the cottage is defined as a protective place by virtue of a set of features that are clearly associated with civilisation: “Firelit, shuttered, slated and stone-walled.”⁶⁰ The image of the game of Scrabble in the sestet works towards the reinforcement

⁵⁵ Parker, *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, 219

⁵⁶ cf. places as “spatio-temporal events”, Doreen Massey, *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), 130

⁵⁷ cf. Eugene O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney. Searches for Answers* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 126-130

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), 31

⁵⁹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 31

⁶⁰ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 31

of the concept of home suggested in the octave – as it is a favourite free time activity, it hints at leisure and domesticity. At the same time, it is a language game that involves the construction of words by combining available letters, suggesting a tentative parallel with the creative act of the poet on a lower scale. The example of the word “love” adds to this sense of domestic intimacy but it also implies the importance of the interior world of the cottage as opposed to the overall location of the farm. While the apparent harmony in the simple conditions of the building itself intimates the pastoral, the external surroundings imply menace and threat rather than harmonious and welcoming countryside.

The second poem, “The Cot” also opens with a catalogue of items which recall memories of their former stay in the cottage but the speaker quickly clarifies the change of their status as “Tenants no longer”.⁶¹ The change of status means difference, the “emptied house”⁶² presents a different environment from the earlier one. The cot of the title becomes an object that embodies the recognition of this sense of change in spite of being in the same location: although it is said to be “back in place”⁶³ and thus it could be regarded as the object of continuity, it is no longer in practical use, having lost its function for the second time, since this used to be the cot of the speaker himself. As O’Brien highlights, referring to Derrida as a basis for his observation, the cot is no longer the same item as its temporal and spatial context is different.⁶⁴ The speaker’s term of “*locus amoenus*”,⁶⁵ together with the opening catalogue of farm items and the traditional object of the cot approximate the pastoral the most, yet the picture still includes elements that check the potentially ideal overall image: the sound of the swinging gate is “shriek”⁶⁶ and the cot is now reduced to a simple piece of furniture with no current significance.

In “Scene Shifts” the regenerative power of nature manifests after human interventions, which is a central motif of the pastoral tradition. The occasion is the recalled episode of a friend cutting his name in the bark of a tree, a common practice of commemoration, yet this act is negated by the speaker’s children stripping off the bark a few days later. The children’s act draws anger from the speaker as the intention of preserving the visit of the friend is reminiscent of childhood memories of “blood-brother scenes where two / Braves nick wrists and cross them for a sign.”⁶⁷ The wound, however, is no longer present, the spot is “healed up now. / The bark’s thick-eared”,⁶⁸ there is only a “scar” marking the occurrence of the episode. The scar image draws a parallel with the “recognition scene”⁶⁹ of the heroic tradition, which marks

⁶¹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 32

⁶² Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 32

⁶³ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 32

⁶⁴ O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney. Searches for Answers*, 127

⁶⁵ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 32

⁶⁶ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 32

⁶⁷ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 33

⁶⁸ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 33

⁶⁹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 33

an intriguing moment as it points beyond the pastoral, since the pastoral is understood as the other of the epic, the discourse of the unheroic.⁷⁰ The poem, however, presents a complex image of the pastoral through the episode as it insists on the power of memory in constituting the experience, which suggests a Wordsworthian parallel as well. The simple act of contemplating the present state of the tree would only reveal a visible disruption in the growth of the bark, yet the cause of it would remain hidden without the memory of its origin. It is through the speaker's recollection that explanation can be gained for the visible sign. The regenerative power of nature is reassuring, yet it only becomes observable because it is triggered by human actions, both of which involve destruction. The two human actions, however, are seen in different lights since the carving of the name into the bark is commemoration, despite not giving a consideration to the fact that the tree is a living creature, whereas the children's act of stripping off the bark is regarded as outright destruction by the speaker, yet it is driven not by the concern for the tree but by the loss of the intended result of the commemorative act. The intention of human writing into the bark is cancelled by another human act, and paradoxically it is nature itself which comes to preserve the intended writing by the scar that forms during the healing of the tree – yet that writing only becomes legible through the power of memory as the natural context of the scar is markedly different. Nature's self-contained power requires the contemplation of the human mind in order to be understood as such and thus facilitate the discourse of the pastoral.

The fourth sonnet of the sequence, entitled "1973", disrupts the pastoral meditation and brings back the dichotomy of the two worlds of inside and outside. The latter only becomes a backdrop, and the speaker is fully separated from the outside reality of the coming of spring as his "hibernation" continues, "Chloroformed against things seasonal".⁷¹ The speaker falls out of rhythm with what surrounds him, not only with the natural world but the human one as well as his ignoring of lent indicates. The final two lines, however, offer a tentative parallel between animals stirring outside in the undergrowth and the speaker's action in the litter of the study, suggesting an analogy for searching for something nourishing in it. This motif gives the impression of the poet as a seeker, which offers a tentative answer to the question, "What is my apology for poetry",⁷² of Sonnet IX from the original sequence, including a cunning contrast to Sidney's concept of the poet as maker. The allusion provides a sideways glance on the pastoral as well and suggests that the speaker's retreat to his study is an act of indifference to the surrounding conditions, the environment is rejected instead of being embraced for inspiration.

The act of return to the cottage is approached from another angle in "Lustral Sonnet" as the poem is constructed around the idea of "breaking in".

⁷⁰ Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 1

⁷¹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 34

⁷² Heaney, *Field Work*, 41

The speaker confesses his unease about overtly protective measures of privacy by admitting that words such as “Breaking and entering”⁷³ mean more thrill than scare for him, and that even such acts as using blinds or drawing curtains represent an attitude “too self-protective and uptight.”⁷⁴ This assertion can link the poem to Heaney’s notorious practice of self-exploration expressed in such poems as the early “Personal Helicon”. The return to Glanmore, however, scares him, he regards himself as his “own first breaker-in”,⁷⁵ since he has been given the “instruction / To saw up of the old bed-frame”.⁷⁶ Although the action is necessary as there is not enough space to remove it otherwise, it still causes anxiety because of its implications, it is “[a] bad action, / So Greek with consequence, so dangerous”.⁷⁷ The final line of the poem offers the mitigating conditions but the sentence structure maintains the ambiguity of the relation of the line “Only pure words and deeds secure the house”⁷⁸ to what goes before: only a comma separates the line from the preceding phrase “so dangerous”, no other syntactic marker indicates a clear connection of causality, or the lack of it, between the act of deconstructing the bed and the precarious situation of the house in its wake. Similarly, the implication of “pure” is unspecified as for its reference to mere presence or a particular condition. Nevertheless, the destruction of the bed is understood as an act of disruption that has the power of changing the course of events.

The octave of “Bedside Reading” emphasises another type of difference from the earlier experience of the cottage compared to the previous poems of the sequence. “The whole place airier”⁷⁹ suggests the impression of more space with a more liberating experience. The morning scene is nearly pastoral yet the simile connecting ivy trained to stay out and memories likewise distanced unsettle the idyllic beginning. The Homeric allusion to Odysseus and Penelope finally waking together after his return eventually focuses on the motif of the bed which has a living olive tree for one of its bedposts in the epic. This is where the speaker suggests a tentative parallel yet the experience is not shared as theirs only “could have been ivy”.⁸⁰ Although the image brings back the pastoral aura of the evoked scene, it eventually remains an imaginary construct with no corresponding physical manifestation of what it describes.

The image of the “whole place airier” becomes the central focus of the final poem of the sequence, “The Skylight”, by virtue of a tangible physical change to the building. The speaker initially objects to the idea of installing a skylight, expressing his preference for the closed and claustrophobic space and the finished impression of completeness the closed ceiling represents. His insistence

⁷³ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁴ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁵ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁶ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁷ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁸ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 35

⁷⁹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 36

⁸⁰ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 36

on that “nest-up-in-the-roof / Effect”⁸¹ suggests not only that sense of perfection he identifies with the closed interior but hints at his earlier unease of having to saw up the old bed-frame with its “Greek” implications. However, his surprise at the effect of installing the skylight constructs the perfect contrast in concord with the tradition of the *volta* of the Petrarchan sestet. The subsequent experience of personal liberation, the metonymic extension of the opening up of the closed roof, draws a parallel with the story of the sick man miraculously healed. The altered conditions create a proper pastoral image, however, it is eventually achieved by the decision of ‘violating’ the original integrity of the cottage and turning it into something different. The act is still indicative of an attempt of connecting what was noted to be separated at the beginning of the sequence, the skylight embodies the removal of the rigid line of division between inside and outside. This symbolically indicates a progress in the sequence from the opening “Winter-evening cold”⁸² to the “summer trees”⁸³ and the “extravagant / sky”⁸⁴ of the final two poems, which suggests a more successful construction of the image of proper retreat – the Glanmore of the second sequence shows a closer affinity with the ideal requirements of a pastoral retreat than the accounts of the earlier set. However, as the place functions as an occasional country escape and not a proper residence, its restorative effects are still seen as limited.

Heaney used the Glanmore motif again a decade later in his volume *Electric Light* (2001) in the poem entitled “Glanmore Eclogue”. The title of the poem indicates the placing of the motif explicitly in a pastoral context as the chosen genre of the eclogue is primarily associated with that tradition, addressed and assessed in detail by Heaney in a prose essay as well.⁸⁵ As the eclogue is a dialogue poem, its approach differs significantly from the earlier poems dealing with the place, its looser and more conversational form and style represent a closer affinity with the pastoral tradition as opposed to the more disciplined sonnet form of the earlier sequences. Bernard O'Donoghue calls the poem a “secondary or applied eclogue”⁸⁶ as it is clearly placed into the specific context of the contemporary world and does not show a Virgilian parallel. The conversation unfolds between a character called “Myles” and a “Poet”; whereas the latter appears as Heaney's representation, the figure of Myles is more enigmatic. He is apparently a person with close relations to the place, an

⁸¹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 37

⁸² Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 31

⁸³ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 36

⁸⁴ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 37

⁸⁵ In an uncollected essay Heaney provides an account of the genre of the eclogue as the example of the pastoral that is capable of addressing various historical contexts by its self-consciously literary nature, tracing its capability of conforming to the demands of various historical contexts, from Virgil through Louis MacNeice and Miklos Radnóti to Czeslaw Milosz and Michael Longley – cf. Seamus Heaney, “Eclogues “In Extremis”: On the Staying Power of Pastoral”. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 2003, Vol. 103C, No.1. (2003), pp.1-12.

⁸⁶ O'Donoghue, “Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic,” 115

“autochthonous”⁸⁷ figure, although his name contains a distant hint to the pseudonym of Flann O’Brien, as its unusual spelling suggests.⁸⁸ The figure of Myles provides the reflective perspective on the current state of the rural world, embodying a down-to-earth approach to the practical aspects of country life, whereas the poet indulges in literary allusions, and their dialogue shows a proper convergence only towards the end of the poem when the poet is asked to supply a proper poem for the rural population.

The poem focuses on the time when Heaney first arrived at Glanmore, as the Poet is identified as a tenant on the land. Myles regards the Poet’s circumstances as the perfect ones for creation, which reveals his knowledgeable understanding of the position of the Poet and which already indicates his reflective position. The Poet’s reference to his benefactor as “Augusta”⁸⁹ is explained by the fact of his arrival in the month of August, but the Lady Gregory and Yeats parallel is unmistakable, as it becomes clear from the response of Myles, especially when the figure of Meliboeus is introduced, a character originating from Virgil’s eclogues as the evicted shepherd, who can be identified with the figure of Synge in this particular context. The relation between the present and the past situations, however, is one of tension as the promise of the past achievement of “Land Commissions making tenants owners, / Empire taking note at last too late...”⁹⁰ is yielding to a configuration in which “Outsiders own / The country nowadays”⁹¹ and “Small farmers here are priced out of the market.”⁹² The past then becomes an object of nostalgia and that reflects the pastoral perspective as it is a vision of the past filtered through the idealising tendency of the imagination that lacks direct experience of the actual conditions. The image of the Poet of his recalled predecessor is likewise drawn in such a way, echoing the idealised pictures of the Celtic Twilight period itself. As a contrast, Myles reminds the Poet of his different occupation and consequent lack of direct experience of country life and more specifically of farming as a means of living for the country population, which draws a cunning response from the Poet, with a pun on Heaney’s own name: “Meliboeus would have called me ‘Mr Honey.’”⁹³ The conclusion of the poem is a simple “summer song”⁹⁴ which is the response of the Poet to the request of Myles.

The concluding song is emblematic of both the pastoral tradition and Heaney’s own understanding of it. The character of Myles asks the Poet for “words” for one of the songs in “Our old language that Meliboeus learnt”⁹⁵ and this request reflects a concern with the tradition itself. Myles wishes for

⁸⁷ O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney. Searches for Answers*, 130

⁸⁸ cf. O’Donoghue, “Heaney’s Classics and the Bucolic,” 115

⁸⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), 35

⁹⁰ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 35

⁹¹ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 35

⁹² Heaney, *Electric Light*, 36

⁹³ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 36

⁹⁴ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 37

⁹⁵ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 36

“words that the rest of us / Can understand”,⁹⁶ which, apart from the hint at the decline and consequent inaccessibility of the original language, stresses the need for the adequate discourse of the pastoral and at once represents a tacit suggestion of revising the pastoral tendency of idealising experience. The song the Poet offers is an aggregate of several antecedents, giving the impression of an attempt of the ‘absolute’ pastoral song: it creates an overall picture of nature which is utterly harmonious and is free of human intervention. In the absence of any sign of human presence at all the rural world of the tradition is shown in its essential form, however, the song is eventually hardly connected with the actual experience of the traditional figures of the pastoral. Its apparent simplicity preserves the idyllic trait of the tradition but excludes the everyday experience of the people of the land, consequently it is an admission of the idealising practice of the pastoral. As the song concludes the poem without response from Myles, there is neither confirmation nor denial of the adequacy of the Poet’s attempt of answering the request.

While the earlier sequences are rooted in Heaney’s own direct experience of the place, the eclogue is a more stylised poem that is thus related more closely to the pastoral tradition. It represents a blend of actual experience with a more self-consciously literary element, but the personal experience is less specific to the location itself with its actual characteristics. The form is more adequate for the tradition yet the observations on the general state of the country work both towards and away from the pastoral and reveal the inherent ambiguity, or even paradox, of the tradition: too generic accounts of the country do not reveal the actual experience whereas too specific representation of local experience will not provide an adequate picture of country life. Although Derek Mahon’s observation “We might be anywhere but are in one place only”⁹⁷ emphasises the essentially localised and personalised nature of direct experience, Heaney’s solution to end the poem with a generic pastoral song indicates a refusal to regard the experience of the specific place of Glanmore as an absolute one.

The name Glanmore features in one more poem explicitly, in “The Blackbird of Glanmore”, of the volume *District and Circle* (2006), as its closing piece. The place serves as the setting for the speaker’s visit of unspecified purpose, and he notices a blackbird on arrival. The sight evokes lines he once translated, bringing the motif of death, and the literary quickly gives way to the memory of his deceased brother and the accident taking his life.⁹⁸ A neighbour’s indication of the superstition linked to the blackbird is recalled, but the speaker’s attention returns to the blackbird on the grass in front of him, and after a brief suggestion of identification with the bird’s position of viewing him his quiet observation of the animal concludes the poem. The experience is

⁹⁶ Heaney, *Electric Light*, 37

⁹⁷ Derek Mahon, *The Poems* (1961-2020). ed. Peter Fallon. (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2021), 128

⁹⁸ the poem entitled “Mid-Term Break” in the volume *Death of a Naturalist* provides an account of that tragic event, so there is a self-allusion present here too

elegantly framed by the lines “On the grass when I arrive” and “In the ivy when I leave”,⁹⁹ as there is a subtle manipulation of their relative positions: while the two lines frame the first stanza, enclosing three lines, they become successive lines at the end of the poem, but there is an interstice inserted between them, following the overall pattern of the alternation of five-line stanzas and a separately printed single line. The visible space between them, however, indicates absence, which recalls the motif of death underlying much of the poem. Compared to the song concluding “Glanmore Eclogue”, an attempt of replicating what is conventionally seen as the essence of the tradition, “The Blackbird of Glanmore” shows a strong contrast with the overtly positive atmosphere of that simple pastoral-like section. Instead, the poem echoes the “Et In Arcadia Ego” motif and ultimately lends a rather sombre tone to the representation of Glanmore which becomes another addition to Heaney’s already complex motif.

Heaney’s move to a secluded cottage in County Wicklow provided him with the opportunity of getting a direct experience of slow-paced rural life as an adult after his time in urban Northern Ireland. As the place shared several features in common with the scene of his upbringing in the rural North, both in terms of its location and its conditions, it offered the possibility of a life that would represent a partly new type of existence, a family man recently become a freelance, as well as a return to a familiar set of conditions in terms of living in the country. Glanmore thus meant a form of reset for Heaney since his interest in and familiarity with the rural world already demonstrated in his early poetry could be reintegrated into his work influenced by his increasingly broadening experience. The secluded location and the frugal conditions of the cottage in a quiet part of the Republic prompt the possibility of regarding Glanmore as a pastoral retreat and the implications of Heaney’s decision to become a freelance also give the impression of a conscious and deliberate act of distancing from a hectic life of established schedules.

Closer scrutiny, however, modifies the potential of the place and the intention of the poet to regard it as a pastoral retreat in the traditional sense. While it functions as one in terms of its location, the acknowledgement of the deficiencies of the motif is present already in the “Glanmore Sonnets” sequence. The frugal conditions of the cottage and the presence of menacing elements work against the inspiring potential of the surroundings, and the structuring of the sequence, with centrally placed poems of a recollected elsewhere instead of attention to the actual place in the present, also indicates Heaney’s admittance of the limitations of the potential of the place as a proper retreat. In the later sequence “Glanmore Revisited” the place is not a residence, it functions only as a temporary writing escape, therefore it embodies a different status for the poet. The later sequence contrasts the present state of the cottage with its earlier conditions but this temporal gap does not employ a nostalgic perspective that would idealise the place in either moment. In yet

⁹⁹ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 75

another attempt the use of a form typically identified with the pastoral does not fundamentally alter the overall picture of the place, and Heaney's final use of the motif adds a darker consideration to it by explicitly including the image of death among the associations linked to Glanmore.

The repeated use of the Glanmore motif is also part of Heaney's practice of returning to earlier themes during his career and reassessing them. Although Heaney claimed the immediate influence of the place on his writing,¹⁰⁰ even the earliest poems dealing explicitly with the cottage were published after his residence ended there, which opens a reflective distance for the motif, and his later returns to it are affected by his broadened experience and shifting focus of attention. In the same manner as he presents his childhood farm experience in its complexity, by a balanced account composed of exhilarating as well as menacing elements, the Glanmore poems also reflect his insistence on honest poetic representation. However tempting the pastoral implications of the place appear, the presence of the anti-pastoral is a constant feature of the poems, regardless of the time and perspective of assessment. The observation of the same place in different times creates a complex motif which eventually incorporates the tradition as well as its critique, pointing towards the post-pastoral – yet as Heaney demonstrates in the eclogue by concluding the poem with a stylised traditional pastoral song that threshold is eventually not crossed.

¹⁰⁰ cf. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, Ch. 7, par. 20

The Importance of Elsewhere in Derek Mahon's Poetry¹

Derek Mahon begins his poem "Beyond Howth Head" with an evocation of the western coast of Ireland by referring to the "dark doors of the declining west / whose rock-built houses year by year / collapse, whose children disappear"². The peculiarity of the place is further emphasised by the fact that these are at once "the crumbling shores / of Europe"³ by virtue of their location at the westernmost end not only of Ireland but of the whole continent itself. The constant erosion of the sea causes a process of physical decay and this is accompanied by a historical and social one in which the usually incomprehensible geological timescale is rendered a tangible one with the help of the palpable changes that happen to a human construct. While the poem at large deals with the phenomenon of change in a broader and more general context, Mahon's decision to open the poem with that particular image points to an important element of his poetry in relation to the concept of place. While the title of the poem "Beyond Howth Head" carries a great deal of ambiguity due to the possible meanings of the word "beyond", its immediate geographical suggestion would be an eastward direction if the location of Howth Head, a small peninsula linked to the mainland by a tombolo, is considered. Mahon, however, chooses to conjure the image of the westernmost edge of the island which is an imagined, or more likely a recollected, element from the perspective of the place of composition implied by the geographical reference of the title. Rather than the immediately visible more tranquil eastern shore, it is the remembered sight of the quickly eroded western seaboard that the speaker refers to by which act he sets up a special perspective in which the focus shifts from the actual to the evoked location, an elsewhere, whose own haunting set of features becomes the figurative device to imply a process beyond their immediate spatial reference and by that it launches the topical focus of the poem.

Mahon's poetry abounds in references to places with a broad range of spatial distribution. In addition to a multitude of locations in Ireland, Mahon's

¹ The title of this section alludes to Philip Larkin's poem "The Importance of Elsewhere." Larkin's tenure as a librarian at Queen's University Belfast between 1950 and 1955 gave him the experience of a place other than his own, thus the sense of "strangeness" provided him with the opportunity of getting "in touch". cf. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (East Saint Kilda and London: The Marvell Press and Faber, 2003), 105

² Derek Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*. ed. Peter Fallon (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2021), 56

³ Mahon, *The Poems*, 56

places include England and America in several instances, and there are also more exotic locales in which poems are situated. On occasion the perspective of the location identified in the title is complemented by another one of a different place, often taking the form of an explicitly named other one or by the broader category referred to as “elsewhere”. While Mahon’s speaker does not demonstrate a strongly grounded sense of attachment to one particular place as the ultimate point of reference considered as home, his insistence on spatial markers, as indicated by the numerous place names in his poems, suggests the importance of place in the experience communicated in the respective utterances. Particular foreign locations provide a sense of distance or contrast by virtue of their individual features, whereas the generic “elsewhere” helps to formulate a more broadly understood different context, though an identifiably sufficiently narrow one, to add emphasis to the peculiar world of the given perspective stemming from the current place of orientation. Seen in this way, such other places, including the broad category of “elsewhere” as well, function as a trope, a device, which provides contrast and by that act they lend further emphasis to what is focused on, insisting on the particularity of each place yet at the same time acknowledging the fact that such particularity is unimaginable without the act of comparison to an elsewhere.

Foreign locations and the concept of an elsewhere from a certain point of presence and observation imply the ideas of displacement and exile. Neil Corcoran notes the lack of “the tropes of exile familiar from a great deal of modern Irish literature”⁴ in Mahon’s poems despite the prominent presence of place names, and he attributes this to an “effort of detachment”⁵ on part of the poet. He regards Mahon’s frequently employed tactics of viewing one place from another as a reinforcement of displacement⁶, adding that “the displacements or strange placelessness of Mahon’s work”⁷ are intended to avoid “the frozen discourses of identity which have surrounded much contemporary Irish cultural debate.”⁸ John Kerrigan, however, observes that “[a]lmost invariably when Mahon writes about place, there is an ontological subplot concerned with man’s desire to belong in the world, cross-cut with colonial anxiety.”⁹ This implies an underlying element to the impression of displacement which ultimately suggests an identifiable point of reference for the existence of some anchor, spatial as well as communal in its nature. Patrick Grant maintains that “Mahon’s eclectic internationalism and typical ironic detachment have enabled him to assess his native Northern Ireland in

⁴ Neil Corcoran, “Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”. In: Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.) *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), 231

⁵ Corcoran, “Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 231

⁶ Corcoran, “Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 233

⁷ Corcoran, “Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 232

⁸ Corcoran, “Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 232

⁹ John Kerrigan, “Ulster Ovids”. In: Neil Corcoran (ed.) *The Chosen Ground. Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), 260

interesting ways,"¹⁰ similarly pointing at an origin which can be considered a point of reference, however distant that may be for the poet. Kathleen Shields also refers to the notion of belonging in Mahon's poetry, yet she does not fully agree with positions that regard Mahon as an alienated Protestant poet who is cut off from his community.¹¹ Although her focus is principally examined in terms of Mahon's communal allegiances, it helps to explain the importance of other locations and the idea of elsewhere in Mahon's poetry as they all presume and require for their definition a particular point of reference.

Arthur McGuinness sees Mahon's particular approach to place in the poet's empiricist attitude¹² that derives from Mahon's "classical distrust of self".¹³ As McGuinness claims, as opposed to the conviction of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella, inheritors of the Romantic tradition, of the universally true nature of their experiences,¹⁴ Mahon has different spiritual predecessors for his "decidedly post-lapsarian perspective".¹⁵ His engagement with the outside world and its phenomena therefore takes a different path from the self-assured approaches of his contemporaries, and this eventually leads to a different relation to place. It is, however, not fully accurate to say that Mahon's places "are not localized"¹⁶ because their descriptions do not abound in specific local cultural details – this approach rather reflects Mahon's attitude to place as actually experienced location and not a learned tradition that is preconditioned by certain assumptions projected onto the contemplated scene. Jonathan Hufstader sees in this practice Mahon's attempt of "social self-definition",¹⁷ a complex approach that involves the use of "polarities"¹⁸ that include the contrasting of different places in the same context, often taking the form of a reference to an elsewhere.

Although the poem "Going Home" does not explicitly name the two locations it contrasts, they are sufficiently outlined to be identified as an English one of departure and a Northern Irish one as destination. The earlier title of the poem, "The Return"¹⁹ is an equally strong yet subtle phrase to involve biography to outline the context in which the two places can be defined. Edna Longley points out the delicate parallel with Louis MacNeice's poem "Woods" for the spatial reference of the respective abundance and scarcity of tress in

¹⁰ Patrick Grant, *Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland, 1968-98. Hardened to Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 61

¹¹ cf. Kathleen Shields, "Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging". *Irish University Review*, Spring-Summer, 1994, Vol. 24, No.1., 67-68

¹² Arthur E. McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective". *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 17, British Poetry since 1945 Special Number (1987), 131

¹³ McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective", 129

¹⁴ McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective", 128

¹⁵ McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective", 129

¹⁶ McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective", 131

¹⁷ Jonathan Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones. Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 114

¹⁸ Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones*, 114

¹⁹ cf. Edna Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art." In: Michael Kenneally (ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1995), 286

the two different locations which also becomes a trope of the two different cultures.²⁰ Although the poem is less concerned with the evoked places themselves, as it is more focused on the cultural difference that the places signify, the metonymic relation that forms the basis of the poem between place and culture insists on the importance of the spatial element. An aspect of the two respective places becomes a vehicle of the contrast that exists between the conditions of these locations, which eventually undermines McGuinness's claim of places not being localized in Mahon's poetry,²¹ even if that localisation rests on one particular, a limited but decisive feature that sets one place apart from another.

"Afterlives" is more explicit in terms of naming the two locations that engage in a mutual act of definition by virtue of their differences. The poem provides only few actual descriptive details of the respective locations of London and Belfast, but the two cities become emblems of two distinct sets of mind corresponding to the associated spirit of the place, insisting on that metonymic relation which is understood as influential in shaping the experience of life for the speaker. The morning light over London leads the speaker to an almost Wordsworthian moment of revelation and subsequent buoyant optimism concerning a bright future ruled by reason and thus capable of existing beyond social divisions, just to be dragged back by his conscience, similarly to Wordsworth's visionary moment passing, to the sober and confining reality of the present. The second part of the poem follows a more careful path by toned-down details of the crossing and the destination is also sketched out by references to weather and the surroundings of the city rather than by what confronts the speaker on arrival as his immediate location. The tentative closure of the poem further weakens the position of Belfast as "home" after years of absence from it, which suggests a precarious balance between the two places: the speaker does not feel attachment towards Belfast due to his lack of contact with the city, yet the London scene has its ambiguity in terms of its status for the speaker as well by the fact of his waking "in a dark flat",²² which phrasing does not clarify his relation to that particular lodging. The contrast between the two places, by virtue of their different mental effects on the speaker, however, is stark enough to create the dynamism that drives the poem and to embody that polarity that Hufstader refers to.²³

In "Going Home" and "Afterlives" the polarity is realised by the contrast and tension between an English and a Northern Irish location that are eventually both presented with some specific details. In a number of other poems one single place is present that functions as the location of the utterance which may in turn evoke other locations, often unspecified, that also serve as metonymic bases for contrast. Although it remains unspecified in "Going Home", the place of departure in that poem is the location addressed in another poem,

²⁰ Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art.", 286

²¹ cf. McGuinness, "Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon's Classical Perspective", 131

²² Mahon, *The Poems*, 61

²³ cf. Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones*, 114

"Ford Manor".²⁴ This time Mahon does not explicitly evoke another place but describes the title location itself in terms of contrasts: oppositions between quiet and noise, old and modern, civilisation and nature turn the place into one with the simultaneous presence and dynamic relationship between these contrary features. As Hugh Haughton points out, "the poem is as alive to the noise of modernity as to the English pastoral tradition".²⁵ The repeated use of the word "even" underlies this dynamism, yet the neatly symmetrical composition of the two stanzas of eight lines with perfect pair rhymes creates a reassuring balance which captures the aura of the place as an essentially pleasant one, an example of "exquisite existence".²⁶ Although the poem lists names of distant locations, "Tokyo, New York or Rome",²⁷ they do not play a role in shaping the image of the described location, and the speaker's use of elements relatable to the pastoral tradition attributes the impression of domestic familiarity with the place.

In a very different manner, the first three stanzas of "Brighton Beach" do not even mention or make a reference to the location the title denotes. All three stanzas begin with the word "Remember"²⁸ to indicate not only a different location but a different time as well, which almost renders the place in the title irrelevant as the locale for the initially described experience. As the poem progresses the function of the recollected past events is clarified: they are evoked to open a contrast with the present in terms of perspective and approach to experience as the speaker makes an explicit reference to his age and the altered conditions that spring from it. The speaker becomes engaged in another mental act instead of contemplating the scenery at hand: remembering a particular shared past gives way to imagining other places in the present. This, however, leads to a generalising comment on the fading "spirit of empire",²⁹ a contrast between past and present addressed on a broader scale than the personal one employed in the first part of the poem. Despite the explicit mentioning only of the "prom", "pier" and "the faded Georgian bricks / Towering over the shore",³⁰ Brighton Beach is sufficiently established as a characteristic emblem of a whole era and its state of mind, and although the details are general, the individual appeal and spirit of the place is established. The speaker may express his scepticism concerning that spirit,³¹ but the evocation of the place itself is successful to embody the contrast that the poem contemplates.

²⁴ cf. Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art.", 286

²⁵ Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (EPUB ed. Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 5, section 1, par. 7

²⁶ Terence Brown, "Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness". In: Michael Campbell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136

²⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 79

²⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 143

²⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 144

³⁰ Mahon, *The Poems*, 144

³¹ cf. the opening paragraph of the essay "Derek Mahon's Geography of Ambiguity: Geography of the Moment"

Mahon's choice of the location is all the more intriguing if the geographical implications of "beach" are concerned. While Brighton's emblematic position as the main resort of the English Riviera has its own meaning in its specific cultural context, the seaside location adds further possible suggestions to the contrast addressed in the poem. The zone of the beach as a place of constant interaction between land and water turns the location into a frontier, with the necessary element of mutuality in the definition of its respective constituents. Although space and time operate in a different way in terms of the possibility of movement in them, there is also a possible parallel since movement in space is at once movement in time: travelling to a place involves time and so does travelling back from a place, and the latter is all the more intriguing since backward spatial movement unfolds in forward temporal movement. The imaginative act of remembering is capable of overcoming this apparently paradoxical relation, in the same way as the simultaneous evocation of another location from one particular place can dismiss the temporal limitation of the actual physical movement of travelling. Brighton Beach thus becomes more than a simple location in which the speaker is anchored as his imagination transcends the spatial (and temporal) constraints that the contemplation of the place would impose on the scope of the poem. Understood in this way, the location has its significance despite the apparent lack of observed details, and the speaker's point arises from the particular "spirit of place" despite his bold claim of the contrary.

The title location has an even more interesting position in "October in Hyde Park" due to the lack of any identifiably specific element that defines the place. Instead the focus of the opening of the poem is a Mediterranean elsewhere, and it is the imagined world of that place at the time of the composition which is described as if it were the one contemplated by the speaker. The perspective shifts to a more general "Europe" and the focus of the poem is transferred to time instead of space as the image of the coming of winter assumes its usual function as a topos of the end. Yet even that temporal reference is confusing as the phrase "after the first rain of winter"³² is in apparent clash with the October of the title, which destabilises the dimension of time to complement its spatial indeterminacy. The only element in the poem that can be associated with the location in the title is the fall of leaves yet that remains a general observation as well, receiving notice only due to the fact of its more apparent presence in a park. The broad sweep of association in the poem is reflected by its irregular form as Mahon does not stick with neat stanza patterns and regular rhymes, it is only in the final section that an arrangement is discernible that reflects an attempt at establishing a pattern. Unlike other poems with identifiable locations, this one does not appear to attribute any specific significance to the spatial marker in the title, apart from perhaps the more spectacular manifestation of autumn change in the natural environment of a park than would be observable in other parts of the city.

³² Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*. (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999), 163

London is a markedly more tangible setting for the poem "One of These Nights", "a metropolitan nocturne".³³ The August night scene with the moonlight appears as uncharacteristic in the otherwise bustling city that turns into a "ghostly"³⁴ one, drawing a brief comparison with "Cashel and Ank'hor Vat",³⁵ only for the speaker to turn his full attention to a more detailed account of the specific scene. The description, however, comes to focus on a temporal parallel instead of a potential spatial contrast with another location: elements of the present indicating massive divisions as their consequence, most notably "racism and inflation"³⁶ induce a sudden shift of perspective to another time, introduced by the phrase "It all happened before".³⁷ The menace of wartime memories resituates the initial peaceful impression although the opening phrase of the poem, "A pregnant moon of August"³⁸ carries its own omen-like potential through the word "pregnant", which even invites a distant association with Yeats's incarnation of the beast in "The Second Coming". The explicit references to "sirens" and "warplanes"³⁹ provide a stark contrast with the initial image of the quiet moonlit city, and the contrast is all the more powerful as Mahon uses the same neat sestet form with the rhyme pattern of *ababcc* throughout the whole poem, except for the last stanza where a seventh line is added to pattern, forming a rhyme with the first line of that stanza, approximating the impression of a more closed structure.

Mahon's residence in England provides an explanation for the frequent presence and importance of such locations in his poetry. American places likewise appear in several poems for a similar biographical reason. With the American locations, however, there is a more apparent awareness of the speaker's status as someone not native to the place. Consequently, these locations prompt the more frequent employment of contrasts as well as more explicitly expressed personal concerns and observations regarding himself, stemming from the position of the outsider distancing himself as a result of being detached from the place. The scope of the poems becomes wider as a result, including reflections on the relativity of spatial positions and the ultimate need to belong somewhere, with this latter motif presented as significantly more emphatic than in poems with Irish locations in the focus.

The setting for "The Globe in Carolina" is undefined beyond the broad reference of the spatial marker of the title, and the poem does not focus on specific local details either. Instead the reflective speaker employs a broader perspective that is facilitated by the trope of the globe yet it is one with an inherent ambiguity: the scale of the globe allows a sweeping gaze from above but at the same time it relies on recollected or imagined experience related to

³³ Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Ch. 6, section 6, par. 20

³⁴ Mahon, *The Poems*, 125

³⁵ Mahon, *The Poems*, 125

³⁶ Mahon, *The Poems*, 125

³⁷ Mahon, *The Poems*, 126

³⁸ Mahon, *The Poems*, 125

³⁹ Mahon, *The Poems*, 126

the mentioned places due to the abstraction the globe represents, in terms of both underlying concept and size. The sunset and subsequent nightfall, however, are experienced by the speaker in his location, and while he employs that broader perspective to imagine the process on a scale larger than the immediately observable one from his position, the impression of the broadening of his field of vision can still be traced back to a local point of origin. The local thus acquires its significance by its contrast with the global perspective into which the poem expands, and this is in part facilitated by the autobiographical speaker's position as an alien in that particular place resulting in a more comfortably realised possibility for detached contemplation.⁴⁰

The opening of "A Lighthouse in Maine" suggests the irrelevance of the actual geographical location of the building itself as "It might be anywhere"⁴¹. Despite this apparent dismissal of the significance of the actual location, there is a fairly detailed description of the lighthouse and its environment, and the speaker's own approach of demystifying the function of the lighthouse also turns it into a more usefully functional everyday landmark than what the initial "ivory tower"⁴² and "polished Buddha"⁴³ designations imply. While the concept of "light" leads to a more metaphysical direction, the repetition of the first line of the poem functions as an element of contrast as the specific location of the lighthouse is explicitly emphasised: "It might be anywhere – / Hokkaido, Normandy, Maine; / But it is in Maine."⁴⁴ Although the exact identification of its position in Maine or of its accessibility is not provided, the insistence on its position, however broadly defined, endows the place with significance that no other location possesses.

Mahon's verse letters of the 1990s also use American locations as their setting, as both "The Yaddo Letter"⁴⁵ and "The Hudson Letter"⁴⁶ are composed from the perspective of New York. While their formal features show a major new departure in Mahon's poetry, breaking with his neat and tightly controlled stanzaic patterns, together with a marked change in style, their concern with place does not represent a new approach. In "The Yaddo Letter" the speaker's central concern is the fact of being separated from his children, leading to a dynamic oscillation between his isolation in New York and the former family memories connected with London. The elsewhere of London is evoked through imagined present and remembered past, with regular changes of point of view between that city and the current location of the speaker.

⁴⁰ The poem underwent significant revision from its original version, entitled "The Globe in North Carolina", published in the volume *The Hunt by Night* in 1982. Mahon dropped 4 stanzas from the middle of the original version with significant effect for the structure of the poem in addition to some less radical alterations.

⁴¹ Derek Mahon, *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 43

⁴² Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 42

⁴³ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 42

⁴⁴ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 43

⁴⁵ the poem is included in *The Poems (1961-2020)* with the title "Yaddo, or A Month in the Country"; in order to retain the original version, the *Collected Poems* (1999) is used for reference

⁴⁶ the poem is retitled "New York Time" with some of its sections also renamed in *The Poems (1961-2020)*; in order to retain the original version, the *Collected Poems* (1999) is used for reference

As some other places are also mentioned as part of his recollections, the current place of the speaker becomes a fixed point to which every other place is an elsewhere in turn, not only in terms of space but also from the point of view of time. The contrast between his current state of lone life and the various earlier moments of shared family history creates tension that makes the poem oscillate between different states of mind as well. Although the speaker maintains a confidential tone throughout and attempts to organise his utterance in leisurely flowing rhymed pentameters, there is an observable fluctuation of mood, also reflected in partly intertextually realised stylistic differences as well, ranging from elegantly formed sentences like "After a month of fog a day would dawn / when the rain ceased, cloud cleared and the sun shone"⁴⁷ through borrowed expressions such as "to thine own selves be true"⁴⁸ to the modern shorthand of "My love 2U."⁴⁹

There is, however, an intriguing element of ambiguity present in the poem as far as places are concerned. New York is clearly asserted as the place where the speaker begins the composition of his text, yet he adds

No doubt, I'll finish them in my attic flat
in Dublin, if I ever get back there
to the damp gardens of Fitzwilliam Square."⁵⁰

Phrased in this way, there is a sense of tension between the suggested certainty "no doubt" and the tentative "if I ever get back there", which is unsettling in itself, but at the same time suggests only a temporary stay in the current location, with the consequent sense of detachment made explicit by the phrase "my attic flat" with its reference to a fixed place of belonging or at least of possession. The speaker, however, constructs his account on the New York – London axis, and it is only at the end of the poem that the triangle is completed by the addition of "Write to me soon in Dublin",⁵¹ with its own well-placed ambiguity as the phrase "in Dublin" may simply denote the permanent residence of the speaker after relocation from New York as well as may imply the presence of the addressed children in Dublin, as some sort of wish-fulfilment stemming from his feeling of loss of contact with them. Nevertheless, the city of New York still functions as the point of orientation to mark the speaker's position as well as his sense of displacement in that particular place in the given moment and also in the more general context of his personal life.

While "The Yaddo Letter" is less concerned with the specifics of the city of composition in terms of actual physical details, "The Hudson Letter" is more tangibly anchored to its place as the speaker is apparently more focused on his environment and what constitutes the spatial context of his life in the

⁴⁷ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 184

⁴⁸ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 184

⁴⁹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 185

⁵⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 182

⁵¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 185

given timeframe. The sequence charts a broader field both in terms of space and time, and provides a more detailed account of the experience of the city with the help of a range of voices that move beyond the scope of the autobiographical. The interplay of voices allows for a more accurate and colourful representation of the experience of the city and it also liberates the speaker from the necessity of monopolising the discourse and the perspective from which to provide the account of the experience. The result is a more profound sense of place and the impression of a more localised spatial context which in turn provides a more thorough insight into the relation of the speaker to his location. The choice of title for the poem, however, is an intriguing one as it is the river, rather than the city, that serves as the spatial marker, which suggests a preference for a natural point of reference instead of a man-made and social one. Moreover, the trope of the river carries several imaginative possibilities, made all the more complex by the winter scenery with ice on the river as it hints at a complex, occasionally even conflicting, layering of represented experience through the contrast of the ice of the surface and the subsurface movement of water with its figurative suggestion of seemingly constant appearance but changing underlying substance.

The sequence begins with an untitled section which provides a snapshot-like account of place and situation in note-like grammar. The rented apartment indicates the speaker's status as an alien in the city yet his wish is to "recover my lost nerve",⁵² which ultimately suggests a longer stay and perhaps a degree of affiliation to the place as part of the process. The speaker's decision to begin the account with a temporal marker also forms an important element of the context as the winter setting hints at a schism between the rhythms of the natural and the human world. The apparent hibernation of the natural world is less prominent in the city as it is overwritten by the routines and practices of civilisation, which works against the initial suggestion of winter as time slowing down, thus the speaker is made a part of the scene as he cannot stay aloof from the flow of life in the city. The morning scene closing the section makes this explicit as the speaker catalogues the process of the starting of the day yet there is a cunning reminder of his not fully situated position by the remark "but first the nightingale"⁵³ to provide an outward glance at inspiration in the quotidian sequence of morning actions.

The second section, entitled "Out There", offers a lively catalogue of metropolitan life observed from close quarters. The recorded items represent the less dignified aspect of life in the city, but apart from some occasional references to American places and the Gershwin allusion, there is no clear indication of a location-specific setting. In contrast with this, in the next section, "Global Village", the place is clearly identified, and the speaker, an "Irish Bohemian"⁵⁴, attempts an act of self-definition in the "clear existential light",⁵⁵

⁵² Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 186

⁵³ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 187

⁵⁴ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

⁵⁵ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

with his labels ranging from “an amateur immigrant”⁵⁶ to “an undesirable resident alien”.⁵⁷ The suggestion of his image of himself as shifting from immigrant to alien is some form of willingly upheld distance and detachment, the impression of a position that remains eventually unaligned to that of the locals, and despite possible similarities and mutual effects, the two positions will never fully overlap but continue to exist in their separate realities. The suggestion of this parallel-like situation is supported by the image of the river in the section “Waterfront”, with the speaker opting for a walk along the pier. The water surface, however, is frozen and the slowly moving body of ice, with its load of urban detritus, becomes a “lithograph”⁵⁸ in which the river and the ocean form a visibly indivisible unit due to the ice. The otherwise potent images of the flowing water of the river and the stationary water of the bay, as well as that of their meeting, are thus dismissed for the anti-climax of “the thaw-water of an oil-drum”⁵⁹ which carries the water topos as the origin of new life. The vision is accordingly sober and disillusioned, even in spite of the emerging sunlight, yet it is at once a clear enough demarcation of place: “The sun / shines on the dump, not on the *côte d’azur* / and not on the cloistered murals, to be sure.”⁶⁰

The account of a late 19th-century young Irish immigrant woman in section V provides a subtle contrast with the perspective of the “amateur immigrant”⁶¹ of section III. The speaker’s careful attempt in the earlier sections to avoid “yet one more craven European / paean to the States”⁶² gives way to a conventional and rather stereotypical view of the New World commonly held at the time of its speaker’s account, which eventually makes the speaker’s own observations in the other sections appear more genuine representations of the place. The collage of newspaper headlines opening the untitled section VI, however, appears to follow the tendency towards stereotypes, yet the speaker eventually focuses on the story of the final headline, that of two seabirds that escape the zoo. The birds as fugitives are observed in detail, their precarious situation in the hostile environment of the city becomes a tentative analogy for the speaker’s position as well, with a possible allusion to the poet figure in Mahon’s earlier poem “Rage for Order”. The recourse to stereotypes continues in the following section with the stock images of the frontier as the backdrop to an imagined other life, only to conclude with an ironic self-reflexive comment that resituates the tone of the whole section, turning it into a pastiche-like account of the popular cultural image of rural America in the 19th century, which provides a fitting counterpoint to the metropolitan image of section V.

⁵⁶ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

⁵⁷ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

⁵⁸ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 192

⁵⁹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 193

⁶⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 193

⁶¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

⁶² Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 190

The observation of the real surroundings returns in section XII entitled “Alien Nation”. The initial list of neon light advertisements indicates a night-time street setting and the speaker’s attention turns to the homeless of the city, “wretched buggers”⁶³ with whom he eventually feels associated. The deeply ironic interjected remark “some have park views, others sleep in the park”⁶⁴ is put in brackets to suggest the practice of evasion, of looking elsewhere in order not to pay attention to the existing phenomenon, yet the speaker deliberately fixes his gaze upon this segment of the population due to his acknowledgement of having had the same experience of exposed exclusion. The contemplation of the homeless and the recognition of shared experience lead to a broadly general statement that is not without ambiguity either:

Blown here like particles from an exploding sun,
we are all far from home, be our home still
a Chicago slum, a house under the Cave Hill
or a caravan parked in a field above Cushendun.⁶⁵

The locations mentioned bridge various types of gaps, geographical as well as social and cultural, and thus suggest that displacement is a general phenomenon and a potential danger for all regardless of their origin, which implies the eventual irrelevance of the original situation of home. At the same time the phrase “be our home still” insists on the importance of a place of origin, an ultimate point of reference that may still function as a wished-for solid element of self-definition. The subtle layering of the actual and the metaphysical in the word “home” is one of the key moments of the sequence as it attributes a general degree of relativity to the understanding of the concept of place, conveniently termed “mobility” by Hugh Haughton.⁶⁶

This idea of relativity is also present in the section entitled “Key West” in an even broader metaphysical context. The apropos is the speaker’s recollection of the hurricane Angie from the previous year, with a comment on its less destructive nature compared to “one of those really *terrible* hurricanes / you hear about, that wreck ‘homes’ and wreak atrocities / on isolated farms, snug harbours, close communities”.⁶⁷ The placing of the word home between inverted commas indicates a distancing of the concept although it is more reflective of an ironic approach to exaggerated media language, also indicated by the italicised “*terrible*”, yet the inverted commas are only used for that single word instead of the whole phrase, which indicates a more personal instance of scepticism. The warnings issued by the media of upcoming hurricanes lead

⁶³ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 197

⁶⁴ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 197

⁶⁵ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 198

⁶⁶ cf. Hugh Haughton, “‘Even now there are places where a thought might grow’: Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon.” In: Neil Corcoran (ed.) *The Chosen Ground. Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), 93

⁶⁷ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 215

the speaker to reflect on “the fragility of all architecture”⁶⁸, which reinforces the doubt raised earlier in connection with the concept of home, further emphasised by the closing image of “retired hippies / who long ago gave up on the land and settled among the rocks.”⁶⁹ This act of deliberate uprooting and relocation suggests the role of choice in the assessment of the personal significance of places, which may provide the speaker with some sense of comfort in his situation as a “resident alien”. The image of the hippies also offers a subtle parallel with the homeless in section XII, although the difference between the hippies’ deliberate decision and the possible various reasons for the footloose state of the homeless maintains a degree of tension in the analogy, especially in connection with the speaker’s confessed association of himself with the experience of the latter group. The speaker’s reflection on his act of remembering “this wintry night, that summery place”⁷⁰ aligns neatly with Mahon’s concept of relativity in relation to place, which represents another pivotal moment in the sequence.

The relativity and mobility of places, especially in relation to home, are approached from another point of view in the section entitled “Imbolc.”⁷¹ The figure of John Butler Yeats, “pilgrim father”,⁷² inspires the speaker to contemplate and even envision his own return home. The closing lines of the section formulate the underlying dilemma of the whole sequence in an explicit manner:

Now, to ‘Yeats, Artist and Writer’, may we add
that you were at home here and in human nature
but also, in your own words, lived and died
like all of us, then as now, ‘an exile and a stranger’?⁷³

The ambiguity of the word “here” offers the possibility of several different layers of meaning, with a narrow reference to the city of New York as well as a broad one of earthly existence, which in turn affects the meaning of “exile” and “stranger” as well, endowing them with both the narrower and the broader focus in turn. The simultaneous situation of being “at home” and an “exile and a stranger” reflects the potential, and the resulting tension, of the different scopes of these terms, and in a similar manner, the acknowledgement of the possibility of being at home in a city other than the regular place of belonging illustrates Mahon’s usual practice of viewing one place from the perspective of, and in relation to, another and eventually finding the respective importance of each place in the process.

⁶⁸ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 216

⁶⁹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 217

⁷⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 217

⁷¹ the title of the section is “St. Bridget’s Day” in *The Poems (1961-2020)*

⁷² Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 218

⁷³ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 219

The assessment of John Butler Yeats's experience of New York as home indicates the importance of the need to belong. The final section of the sequence extends the potential involved in the closing sentence of the previous section and expounds on it to reflect the changing attitude to place and being placed with the passing of time and the progress from innocence to experience. The latter idea is the starting point of the section as the one-time wish to "let me out and let me go"⁷⁴ is replaced by "take me back and take me in"⁷⁵ in the present, with the involved temporal gap representing the general acquisition of experience. Moreover, the wish to belong converges on the concept of home as a point of genuine reference, unspecified whether that of origin or of self-chosen affiliation, as the speaker's explicit phrasing of "take us in where we set out long ago"⁷⁶ implies. The contemplation of the night scene outside centres around the opposition of light and dark, yet it also uncovers an essential ambiguity concerning them: the natural alternation of light and darkness is deliberately broken by the technological conquest realised by artificial illumination against which emerges the need for "our own private night / to keep the glare out."⁷⁷ This image of opposition is used as an analogy for a broader one, an essentially epistemological point for separating the still from the constantly changing, a cornerstone of human thinking, the need for order and stability, a fixed point amid the flux of constant change. The speaker provides a list of artefacts as representatives of permanence in the flux, employing the old Romantic trope, but in a bold move parallels it with individual marks that may also carry the potential of becoming permanent, as the footprints of unnamed women represented in a painting testify to it. While there is an awareness of the inevitable omnipresence of change manifesting most clearly in human mortality, the possibility of achieving stillness in the context of individual life is seen in a state "at night to lie / empty of mind, the heart at peace".⁷⁸ Although the line break serves as a reminder of the illusory nature of this, because "the voyage is never done,"⁷⁹ the possibility of finding stability in an individual context, on the individual scale, is expressed in the need for being let in, since the essential function of home is to provide this still point. The final broad sweep of images ranging from the homeless through "the gaseous planets"⁸⁰ to various other forms of life in different locations eventually makes the wish to belong even more emphatic as the speaker employs his frequent bifocal vision, seeing "even in the icy heart of February, / crocus and primrose."⁸¹ The reference to the cold leads to the concluding cry of "Take us

⁷⁴ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 220

⁷⁵ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 220

⁷⁶ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 220

⁷⁷ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 220

⁷⁸ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 221

⁷⁹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 221

⁸⁰ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 222

⁸¹ Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 222

in, take us in",⁸² with the repetition making the wish to belong more explicit and desperate at the same time.

"The Hudson Letter" takes its location seriously as a place with its own characteristics and Mahon pays more attention to its details than he does in his usual practice with places. There is observation of city life, several landmarks of New York provide local colour, but at the same time the city becomes the starting point for broader and more universal considerations of the relation of the speaker and place, not only with regard to the particular location he is situated in but a more general understanding of place per se. The position of the "resident alien" fosters an ingenious approach with both situated and displaced elements at the same time, therefore the speaker reaps the benefits of both involved observation and a more detached assessment of what is observed. In contrast with several other places in Mahon's oeuvre, the importance of the local in inducing these particular reflections is tangible due to the speaker's status, yet in a similar manner to the perspective of his other poems related to place there is a likewise tangible importance of elsewhere, of other locations that contrast with the present one to throw light on more universal concerns. The local is thus brought into at least imaginative interaction with the other, and the ultimate wish to belong, emerging from the contemplation of places, is made more emphatic by the broadened perspective the inclusion of those other locations facilitates.

In a number of poems Mahon explicitly uses the word "elsewhere" to create contrast and by that act to eventually concentrate increased attention to the particular place in which the poem is set. As the word "elsewhere" implies, the contrasting element is an unspecified other place, perhaps any other place beyond the one involved as location in the given poem, without the explicit need for specific identification, although the possible scope of the term can often be inferred from the contemplated context. While the usual reference of the word indicates a simultaneous consideration of another set of locations, the purely spatial meaning on occasion becomes complemented by a broader perspective that can incorporate historical and cultural motifs, which in turn offers a more potent contrast by virtue of the broadened context.

The elsewhere in the poem "North Wind: Portrush" offers a contrast principally in terms of physical features which eventually provide a friendlier environment for a richer experience of life. The desolate-looking northern coast is described by the omnipresence of the wind, defining in turn the inhabitants and their lives. The potential of the wind to create the impression that "this was the first day"⁸³ because of the wind-swept cleanness of the place is described as a "false sense of reprieve"⁸⁴ as the almost permanent presence of the wind makes the location a rather hostile one for habitation. The place is

⁸² Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 222

⁸³ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 13

⁸⁴ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 13

eventually set up in opposition to an undefined general elsewhere before the conclusion of the poem⁸⁵:

Elsewhere the olive grove,
Le déjeuner sur l'herbe,
 Poppies and parasols,
 Blue skies and mythic love.
 Here only the stricken souls
 No spring can unperturb.⁸⁶

The lack of proper sentence structure suggests a timeless state and thus conditions that are experienced as permanent. The “elsewhere” in its undefined and indeterminate nature may cover a broad range of possible locations of various types, and by virtue of that it turns the attention back onto the local, the setting of the poem, with increased emphasis on its own particulars.

“The Snow Party” focuses its glance on a distant and exotic setting as the 17th century figure of Bashō and the ceremony of snow parties are evoked. The short and tight, haiku-like stanzas reflect the highly disciplined social code of medieval Japan, and the motif-based description of the ceremony with the subdued tone creates the impression of a detached and neutral position for the speaker. There is, however, subtle irony in the juxtaposition of the peaceful scene of the distant Japanese ceremony and the violent turbulence of the world of “elsewhere” with its barbarous practices, in addition to the contrast it shows between art and history.⁸⁷ Although the time frame of the poem is clearly identifiable and thus “elsewhere” is temporally determined in this context, the apparent position of the speaker contemplating the scene is that of the hindsight of history, which makes a broader range of reference possible for the presented contrast. As a result, the understanding of the concepts of civilised and barbarous is relativized as the poem reverses their usual order determined by the approach of European-centred history – by shifting the point of reference to the exotic Japanese location, the resulting distance allows for a reconsideration of the validity of the traditionally accepted positions.

The concept of “elsewhere” has an even broader reference in “A Postcard from Berlin”. The choice of location, the divided city of Berlin,⁸⁸ evokes analogy with the situation of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the heavy historical heritage of the city adds some other elements to the association. The bright weather conditions of Berlin at the time of writing, however, suggest a more peaceful moment, the clear sky and the unobstructed flight of clouds turn

⁸⁵ The penultimate stanza of the 1982 version of the poem, which is this particular stanza, was omitted from the revised versions published in later collections.

⁸⁶ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 13

⁸⁷ cf. Edna Longley, “Looking Back From *The Yellow Book*.” In: In: Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.). *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), 31

⁸⁸ The poem was published in the 1982 volume *The Hunt by Night*, at which time Berlin was divided into two parts, with the iconic Berlin Wall representing the physical separation of the two parts of the city. The poem is not included in collected editions.

attention away from the reality of division, if only temporarily. The haunting images of the past emerging in the form of “echoes”⁸⁹ for the speaker balance the picture and act as a reminder of the false nature of apparent peace. The recalled menace of the past, however, is dispelled yet the motif of elsewhere does not provide satisfactory reassurance of the disappearance of tension: the present may seem free of conflict, “but the fires / Of abstract rage, exhausted there, / Blaze out of control elsewhere.”⁹⁰ Mahon’s choice of focusing on the sky to suggest the possibility of moving beyond division and the subsequent recourse to memories to still insist on its presence despite apparent calm provide an unsettling parallel with the Northern situation. Although the spatial scope of “elsewhere” is undefined and thus offers a broader range of possible references, some of those are inferable, with Northern Ireland as one of the most obvious representatives. In addition, the word does not only denote a purely geographical other but acquires cultural and historical dimensions as well. “Elsewhere” is thus no longer confined to temporally synchronous other places but opens a much broader universal human context. Its function of concentrating even more attention to the place in relation to which it is marked is retained, but by its broader scope of possible references, extended in time as well, it becomes a pivotal element in Mahon’s assessment of the experience of place.

Seamus Heaney observed in connection with Mahon’s poetry that “in order for any place to be credible for Mahon, it has to be reimagined in the light of other places”,⁹¹ and refers to the poet’s “sense of bilocation”⁹² as an essential feature of his approach to place. Providing a more general context for this, Hugh Haughton points out the importance of the relation of place to other places in Northern Ireland. As he terms it, “allegiance to other places”⁹³ forms an element of the approach to place as part of self-definition and the context of belonging which ultimately stems from the situation of the province. Mahon’s relation to his native Northern Ireland and his several instances of residence outside it represent a peculiar case in this respect as his general sense of detachment from place observed by various critics⁹⁴ is coupled with an extensive range of locations featuring in his poetry. While Seamus Deane identifies the city of Belfast forming the ultimate centre of gravity and therefore point of reference⁹⁵ for the poet, there is an observably broader set of vantage points for Mahon when he addresses place. Even when focusing on Belfast there are

⁸⁹ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 49

⁹⁰ Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 49

⁹¹ Seamus Heaney, “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland.” *The Agni Review*, 1985. No. 22 (1985), 168

⁹² Heaney, “Place and Displacement”, 168

⁹³ Haughton, “Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 87

⁹⁴ cf. Corcoran, “Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 231; Haughton, “Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, 87; Eamonn Hughes, “‘Weird / Haecceity’: Place in Derek Mahon’s Poetry. In: Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.). *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), 102

⁹⁵ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 156

other places referred to which can offer contrast with the city, and this relation of places underlies most of his poems that have an explicit focus on the spatial element, creating the impression of Mahon as, to borrow Terence Brown's phrase, "the poet of repeated dislocation".⁹⁶

Mahon's residence outside Ireland results in a number of poems with foreign locations, principally English and American ones. His position as a resident with an origin in another place supports the viewpoint of detachment, and while his accounts of such places are framed by local markers, there is a frequent motif of another location to serve as a counterpoint or a balancing item to the immediate surroundings to create a more complete impression. The foreign locations tend to facilitate more general reflections on experience by their difference from the familiar environment in which the speaker appears more grounded, and they can in turn readjust the speaker's relation to that environment. Even more frequently than with Irish locations, Mahon includes other places in the scope of his poems with foreign locations or employs the generic term "elsewhere" to eventually create a web of relations, a matrix of places in which each has its role to play. This role is at least partly defined by the relation of the given place to some others, as if reflecting the concept of the infinite universe with no recognisable centre and consequently having no fixed ultimate point of reference and thus suggesting that everything is relative. In this modern world devoid of a commonly discoverable and identifiable centre the wish to belong is even more prominent, and with that comes the recognition of the importance of embracing affiliation, the acceptance of the individual's need to partake in the delineation and establishment of a fixed point, commonly regarded as home. The importance of elsewhere is to realise and assess difference, to provide cornerstones for definition and thereby to encourage the endorsement of the existence of, and the subsequent possibility for striving for, a place of belonging. Yet all this remains an essentially continuous project, a quest, since establishing the identity of such a place is itself a process, as Doreen Massey argues:

[...] the identities of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing. They are also unfixed because of the continual production of further social effects through the very juxtaposition of those social relations. Moreover, that lack of fixity has always been so. The past was no more static than is the present. Places cannot 'really' be characterized by the recourse to some essential, internalized moment.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Terence Brown, "Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness". In: Michael Campbell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139

⁹⁷ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 169

This understanding makes relations with elsewhere a fundamental element of the assessment of any place since “[t]he identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside’.”⁹⁸ Mahon’s approach to and treatment of places follows the same recognition, and while he is convinced of the specificity of each place, the comprehension of that specificity depends to a great extent on those “interactions with ‘the outside’”, on the importance of elsewhere.

⁹⁸ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 169

Borders Crossed and Borders to Cross: Borders in John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom*

Borders and frontiers have always occupied a special place in human experience due to their nature of representing division and separation simultaneously with the implication of linking and overcoming the very same categories of division and separation. The concept allows for, as well as requires, the assessment of experience from one particular position yet the presence of another is acknowledged as a result of its fundamentally dialectical nature. The notion of discontinuity also forms a significant part of the concept yet at once continuity is implied since the act of crossing the border, regardless of its type, is a means of getting into contact, of establishing a link, forming a continuous relation between the separated items. As a peculiar embodiment of the human need for delineation and organisation, the border functions as a practical category in most cases of human experience, and this is its very potential that opens it up for enquiry and possible subversion. Although border, boundary and frontier are originally geographical categories, denoting and marking specific places, their understanding extends well beyond that field. Moreover, in an increasingly globalising world the geographical assessment of such categories becomes accordingly complex, as the evolution of the discipline of border studies indicates. As a result of broader political changes in the understanding of borders, there has been a marked shift from being regarded as “formal political markers of sovereignty”¹ to “multifaceted social institutions”,² with a due participation of discourse in the construction of the concept. As the geographical understanding of the border broadens to involve a complex anthropological and social dimension as well, the interpretation of the concept becomes possible on a wider and more comprehensive scale with significant cultural constituents included in its understanding.

The geographical concept of the border as a spatial element in the construction of sovereign states has its rather peculiar existence in the context of Ireland. The product of partition, the Irish border has long been a field of interest for various reasons, heavily laden with politics, and a frequently targeted scene of violence. The border has been contested on numerous occasions on various grounds yet its existence could not be overlooked, and during various decades its treatment would vary according to current political considerations and conditions. The individual experience of the border, however, is more

¹ Jussi P. Laine, “A historical view on the study of borders”. In: Sergei V. Sevastianov, Jussi P. Laine and Anton A. Kireev (eds.) *Introduction to Border Studies* (Vladivostok: Dalnauka, 2015), 29

² Laine, “A historical view on the study of borders”, 29

closely related to the concept of liminality, the sense of being in a zone of transition, of a world of no clearly defined allegiances and proper belonging, of the presence of boundaries and the need to confront them – reflecting the essentially arbitrary nature of its conception in that particular place where it is situated.³ Given the often tense relation of the political entities separated by that particular border, the individual experience is consequently that of anxiety, the sense of being scrutinised, and the act of physical crossing is thus at once a crossing of states of mind with a multifarious entanglement of space and time as the border inescapably embodies a historical dimension too.

John Montague's experience of the border is deeply rooted in his own background. Although biography is to be observed with reservations in relation to textual analysis, Montague's complex background and its elements forging his identity as a poet definitely have a bearing on his frequent use of the border motif in his poetry. Born in New York City, then sent back to the original family home in Northern Ireland yet separated from his siblings, the poet had his own childhood experience of borders of various types. His university education in Dublin and subsequent studies and work abroad would also provide him with several aspects of observing as well as crossing borders. While his regular experience of crossing the border in childhood principally refers to a memory of the political zone of division, later recollections lead to contemplation not only on the act of crossing but its accompanying physiological and psychological effects as well as broader and more complex implications made possible and explicit by the concept itself.

The collection entitled *The Dead Kingdom* (1984) is concerned with the motif of the border in several ways and on several levels. The volume gives an account of a journey to the North on the particular occasion of the death of the poet's mother. The basic motif of the journey is a potent element in itself which comes to be compounded by that of the border, becoming symbolic in several ways: the collection relies on the image of borders and frontiers of numerous types where the physical one becomes the least important – yet it is still present as that is the one that eventually separates past from present. The return to the North is treated at once as a kind of time travel since the opening section already announces the event of death, prompting the actual journey as a subsequent event, yet as the journey unfolds, the locations passed along the way come to be immersed in memories, personal as well as communal, thus the northward movement in space is complemented by a backward one in time, eventually suppressing in significance the forward one of the physical journey itself. This treatment of the journey motif is the re-enactment of the one attempted in the earlier collection *The Rough Field*. Whereas the poet admits his failure of return in that collection, the same act is more successful in *The Dead Kingdom*, as the lack of the presupposition of the earlier volume and the present awareness of the purely imaginative possibility of the

³ cf. K.J. Rankin, *The Creation and Consolidation of the Irish Border*. Working Papers in British-Irish Studies No. 48, 2005, Institute for British-Irish Studies, University College Dublin, 2

return allow for a proper assessment of the experience to examine in the more confined and confining context of the personal.

As the collection is prompted by the occasion of the death of the mother, the organisation of its sections is determined by recollection, driven by its own logic. The first poem defines the present of the collection by a reference to the news of the mother's death, and what follows is the account of the journey North – at first described in poems reminiscent of snapshots, yet with the present sight already recalling memories attached to the respective locations, which creates not only a catalogue of places passed on the way but a “geography of the mind”⁴ as well. The personal memories are multifariously entangled with communal ones due to the speaker's implicit conviction of the inescapable imprint of the latter on the former. The journey becomes similar to a series of stations in this way, with each location evoking several possible temporal associations. It is in the fourth section that a marked personal time shift occurs as images of the journey are replaced by various recollected and reconstructed scenes and phases of troubled family life. The speaker recounts his attempts of building that sadly missed mother and son relation and the restoration of the family circle with the return of the father after decades of absence, yet there is a tangible sense of the impossibility of recovering lost time, which fits neatly the elegiac tone of the collection.

The first instance of border crossing in the collection is depicted in the opening poem, “Upstream”. The speaker is summoned from the water to the shore with the news of the death of his mother – the otherwise simple, repeatable and reversible change of medium, however, becomes symbolic as the passing of the mother represents a definite and irreversible alteration. The exchange of the fluid and floating medium of water for the solid and hard one of the land can at once be seen as an act of clarifying the difference between spatial and temporal, with the former allowing for backward and forward physical movement and the latter rendering that only as an imaginative category. However, the speaker's recollections of memories evoked by the places revisited during the journey that follows dismiss that difference and the movement between present and past becomes an easily possible manoeuvre, moreover, it is the spatial that becomes tangibly confined by the fixed route. As early as the second poem of the collection the spatial begins to function as a gate to the temporal yet there is an observable difference in the treatment of the two dimensions: whereas the spatial journey is a linear northward one, the temporal depends on associations that do not observe a straightforward chronological organisation. While the later sections of the collection oscillate between private memories and communal historical ones, occasionally shifting in a seemingly random way from one to the other, the first section provides an overall orienting perspective by a general assessment of change. The poem entitled “Process” demonstrates the contrast between the omnipresence of change

⁴ Richard Allen Cave, . “John Montague: Poetry of the Depersonalised Self.” In: Michael Kenneally (ed.). *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1995), 218

and the only constant presences of earth and sky, eventually concluding in the next piece, “Gone”, with the only possible human response to change, that of acceptance and elegiac remembering.

The second section of the volume continues the association of physical locations with a tangible temporal element, with both the personal as well as the legendary and the historical presented in relation to the given place. There is a careful and delicate balance between the two types of history as it is observable in the subsequent poems “Red Island”, “Crannóg” and “Sword Land” which answer one another in this respect. These poems demonstrate the speaker’s awareness of the entanglement of the personal and the communal, with the latter inescapably bearing upon the former, which is offered as a form of explanation for the sad family history that would be recounted in the later sections of the collection. The double perspective of personal and communal becomes explicitly ironic in the poem “This Neutral Realm” by the understanding of the difference, with hindsight, between real and childishly imagined war, yet the poem does not move beyond the scope of the immediately comprehensible human time scale of one particular individual, so the effect is that of personal understanding only. The ultimate assessment and the balancing moment of the section is offered in the poem “The Well Dreams” as the dialectic of change and stability is registered both in and out of nature. The image of the well and its water surface also hark back to Yeats’s image of the stone and the living stream in “Easter, 1916”, opening the possibility of a sensitive dialogue despite the different context. In Yeats’s poem the unmoving stone resists the change embodied by the flowing water of the stream and the flux observable in the surroundings represented by images of the clouds, birds and passing people. In Montague’s account it is the water that becomes the representation of permanence: the well as standing water has the potential of embodying the constant state of stability, achieved in an intricate process leading to equilibrium:

*Sometimes, a gross interruption;
a stone plumps in.
That takes a while to absorb,
to digest, much groaning
and commotion in the well’s stomach
before it can proffer again
an almost sleek surface.*

*Even a pebble disturbs
that tremor laden meniscus,
that implicit shivering.
They sink towards the floor,
the basement of quiet,
settle into a small mosaic.⁵*

⁵ John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1995), 147

The image of the border becomes an integral one in the third section as it is in this part of the collection that the physical journey includes the moment of crossing. The description of the actual crossing is preceded by a reference to the legendary origin of the border, complemented by a short and rather bleak account of the landscape near that line of division, echoing the perspective of *The Rough Field*:

The only beauty nearby is a small glacial lake
sheltering between drumlin moons of mountains.
In winter it is completely frozen over, reeds
bayonet sharp, under a low, comfortless sky.
Near the middle there is a sluggish channel
where a stray current tugs to free itself.⁶

Similarly to the earlier collection, the northern landscape is not romanticised, its harshness is objectively recorded and mediated, and this technique manages to maintain the sense of reflective distance. The image of the lake at first gives the impression of some solace from its unattractive surroundings yet the winter scene removes the mitigating effect with the nearly deterministic backdrop of the sky. Almost despite the conditions the lake still boasts of life yet the “solitary pair of swans”⁷ is not only a deliberate revision of the Yeatsian echo but the qualifying oxymoron hints at confinement, in concord with both the landscape and the weather, recalling the poem “Process” with its unchanging earth and sky, which in turn resonates neatly with the proximity of the border.

There is a marked shift in the observation of the surroundings as the border is crossed. The speaker’s experience of anxiety on approaching the border sharpens the contrast between what is recalled as pleasant and comforting past and menacing and unsettling present, and the latter is made tangible by references to the visible reminders of the everyday reality of the Troubles. Although the journey forming the frame of the collection follows in time the death of the mother, there is an observable schism at the episode of the border crossing as the historic present tense takes over to recall the speaker’s previous visits to the hospital to witness the slow dying of his mother, and the replacement of the past tense with the present foreshadows the later sections with their attempts of restoring the family circle and at once serves as a self-reflexive admission of the purely imaginative and tentative perspective of the speaker in relation to that motif. The textual representation of the moment of crossing is accordingly heavily laden with implications:

Under Quilca Mountain
inching the car across
a half-bombed bridge,

⁶ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 153

⁷ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 153

trespassing, zigzagging
 over potholed roads, post-
 boxes, now green, now red,
 alternately halted by British
 patrols, unarmed *gardaí*,
 signs in Irish and English,
 both bullet-pierced, into
 that shadowy territory
 where motives fail, where
 love fights against death,
 good falters before evil.⁸

The passage reflects the very ambiguity of the concept of the border itself. The short lines create a simultaneous experience of claustrophobia as well as a quick downward movement through the same lines to challenge and counter that feeling, hinting at the dynamic drive of contrary trends between confinement and the wish to escape it, which neatly reflects the experience of the border per se. The careful setting of the line breaks separating phrases (“post- / boxes”, “British / patrols”) comments on the arbitrariness of the idea of the division and also on the fact that despite division, these phrases, and consequently all those phenomena that are intended to be divided in a broader context, still connect and function. The simultaneous presence of two cultures that are side by side yet are still distinct provides some legitimization of the concept of the border but there is apparently not a neat change from one to the other but a constant switching back and forth: the word “now” destabilises the linearity of the movement, and the mentioning of the British patrol before the Irish *garda* also calls into question the direction of the journey. The result is rather a sense of confusion and unintelligibility as the “shadowy territory” indicates, and the last lines of the section are beyond any possibility of locating the experience in a neat and decisive way in relation to any specific place.

The subversion of the physical border is carried forward in the poem “The Plain of Blood” in which the legendary is utterly dismissed. While the earlier “The Black Pig” alluded to a possible mythic origin of the border, this poem identifies and locates the actual source of the later conflict in “wise imperial policy”.⁹ This marks a special moment in the collection as no further itinerary is outlined for the present journey, the destination is not specified by the speaker after the border has been crossed, as if the act of crossing itself rendered the destination irrelevant. The disillusioned explanation for the division of the province, however, does not seem an adequate conclusion as a curse and a blessing follow, with the final poem of the section, entitled “Deities”, which revisits the legendary and the mythic yet renounces those motifs at the same time by the explanation of their purely human origin.

⁸ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 154

⁹ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 155

The crossing of the actual physical border becomes at once the crossing of another type of border as the next section is composed of recollections of the family history. The present journey is replaced by an episodic yet condensed account of the past that traces the attempts of the adult son to establish a relation with the mother who refused him as a child. This retrospective reconstruction uncovers what is referred to by the speaker euphemistically as the mother's "Melancholy destiny"¹⁰ as the family history is shown to have been determined by powers of the history of the province, as already hinted at during the stations of the northward journey. The close entanglement of the personal with the communal had inescapable consequences for that specific group of Northern republicans to which the speaker's family belonged, including exile and separation, which marks an essentially tragic route that is interpreted by the speaker as emblematic and thus representative of the whole community. The last two sections of the volume thus point beyond their immediate circle of reference and become a general account of a broader social spectrum of experience. The acknowledgement and acceptance of historical forces shaping individual lives eventually reduce the responsibility of the family members, the speaker's reaction is forgiveness rather than blame, yet he is only left with the possibility of an imaginative posterior reconstruction of the picture, which is at once the illustration of the technique of the elegy as a genre in a self-reflexive manner.

The fourth section of the collection traces the process of reconciliation between son and mother as a belated forming of a nearly intimate relationship. The story of maternal rejection is gradually overwritten by a willed and wished for construction of a proper relation, and it is at once an imaginative reconstruction of the possible causes and reasons for its original absence. The project is initiated by the speaker but is eventually embraced by the mother as well, and although no precise time span or chronology is provided, there is a sense of a developing relationship. The speaker's choice of episodes from family life evades the question of personal responsibility, the recalled scenes emphasise the brevity of happy moments of union and the menace of exile and separation as the more general conditions of their experience, and the speaker employs his perspective of the reflective distance of adulthood in depicting the past without any interference from his childhood memories. The section concludes with a somewhat ambiguous poem entitled "Last Journey", dedicated to the late father of the speaker, yet neither the time of the journey nor the "you" of the poem are properly clarified. The final piece of the section broadens this mystery as well as repeats that tentative explanation for the unintelligibility of the sight of the Northern reality: as the family history is impossible to be detached from the history of the province, the present-day situation cannot be interpreted without the knowledge of that specific history.

The final section of the volume contains not only the funeral of the mother but a delicate, if eventually risky attempt of putting the finishing touches

¹⁰ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 164

to the reconstructed picture. There is an account of the sensing of the final moments, and there is also the retelling of the funeral itself, yet the central element of the section is the explicit admission of maternal rejection and the subsequent attempt of the mitigation of its consequences. The speaker's position as an adult contemplating the scene from the perspective of that particular present renders the primal hurt in a more objective way and the concluding note is that of forgiveness, presented in the poem "The Locket" with the discovery of the mother's medal hiding the picture of the infant boy. Although this motif risks melodrama, the next poem draws a delicate parallel between the function of the mother and the speaker's own family, which eventually repositions the whole preceding story, and the closure of the section completes the journey by evoking the initial image of the boat. The return journey is at once the conclusion of the current one as well as the beginning of a new phase of life after the funeral, thus the re-crossing of the physical border in the reverse direction becomes another border crossed in terms of the context of the final loss of the mother.

The imaginative reassessment and readjustment of the family relationship is the proper focus of the poems, eventually creating the ultimate metaphorical border of the volume. The tracing of the relationship unfolds on different layers: the historical one of the separated family is complemented by the personal one of mother and son, yet all this is modified by the fact of the speaker's perspective as an adult contemplating past events. This retrospective position resituates the intellectual and emotional assessment of the relationship itself, thus a border of a type is crossed in the poems exploring the possible and probable causes of the traumatic experience of rejection. In the process of tracing the family history chronology is handled in an arbitrary manner as the speaker moves between his childhood memories and those of the already grown man stubbornly returning to the mother in search of a proper relation. There is also a shift from the mother to the father in some of the poems, breaking the linear thread of the narration, which tactics also implies the expression of absolution for the harsh family history since it is the consequence that the narrative uncovers as it unfolds, rather than attempting to express blame for those consequences. This becomes possible only from that particular position of the adult observer assessing the past after the passing of both parents, which eventually suggests the crossing of yet another border, that of a tentative and rather weird dialogue which is composed of recollected events filtered by the contemplating consciousness of the speaker. As the events are recollected, the characters also become constructs of the contemplating intelligence, thus a personal fiction is created with an elegiac tone in which the border between fact and inference is blurred and becomes eventually impossible to detect.

Another notable border of the volume is the epic/lyric divide which was already employed by the poet in the earlier volume *The Rough Field*. The act of creating a narrative out of short lyrics is essentially an aspiration that is associated with the modernist tradition, reflecting "modernist ideas of poetry

as process, poetry as metamorphosis".¹¹ On a more self-reflexive level a collection of lyrics that eventually construct a narrative is essentially a performative embodiment of the conceptualising of the border between the two traditions. The lyric as a snapshot of a momentary state stands opposed to the epic as a depiction of a process, yet the grouping of the former into sequences that enter into different relations with one another can construct a narrative, thus making the border between the two possible to be crossed in both directions. That it is not only a linear, one-directional option is supported by the organisation of the volume since the recollections brought about by the places passed through during the journey do not create a neat chronology, which becomes all the more salient when family history is foregrounded.

As the concept of the border involves passage from one world to another, the experience presented in the collection can also be seen as being of the same kind too. The reflections of the poems become possible only in this particular context, the recovery of the relationship can only be told after the mother is dead. As a result, she is deprived of her voice, the representation of her figure becomes the creation of the poet-speaker, the son who is a "virtual orphan, suspended between worlds".¹² The emotional dimension becomes heavily influenced by the trauma suffered in childhood and although the fact of the mother's death remains a constant presence underlying the context of the poems, the frequent repetition of the motif of maternal rejection reassures the importance of the fact of the trauma. Whether this can be overcome and crossed as a sort of border remains the question of the volume on one level. There is no definite answer provided although an attempt is made: in the final section, entitled "A Flowering Absence", the question of the eponymous poem, "How can one make an absence flower, / lure a desert to sudden bloom?"¹³ receives a tentative response in "A New Litany" as the speaker's vision of his own family is drawn, yet it is indeed only tentative as the poem's closure, "a flowering presence?"¹⁴ is concluded by a question mark.

The frequent crossings between the present journey and past memories identify time as a border too. The return to the North is also a return to childhood memories yet the border between the present and the past states of the speaker cannot be crossed as the earlier scenes can only be recollected and not directly accessed – however, the speaker acknowledges this and does not attempt the same type of return as in *The Rough Field*. This is a consequence of the occasion of the journey itself: at the beginning it is made clear that the past is closed and there is no recourse to it. This eventually leads to a peculiar status: the recollected past is refined out of time, it is deprived of what gives it its essence, time itself. This provides an analogy to the mother's current

¹¹ Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry. Politics, History, Negotiation. The Evolving Debate, 1969 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 107

¹² Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry. The American Connection* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 30

¹³ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 180

¹⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, 184

status as her existence in time terminates with her death, her figure becomes ethereal as the speaker manipulates the chronology, alternating between images of the journey to her funeral, the poet-speaker's visits and her imagined youth. The reconstruction of the mother figure is essentially the embodiment of a fundamental paradox of the elegy itself: though her liberation from the constraints of time is complete, the very fact of her passing imposes another limitation on her as it is the contemplating intellect of the speaker that gives her voice thus it is not her that speaks but the speaker's (re)constructed image of her.

The interspersing of private memory with the historical is a constant reminder in the poems of yet another border – or rather, the lack of the existence of a proper one between the individual and his community. Although the emphasis of a common historical destiny is less prominent than in the volume *The Rough Field*, it still forms an important element of the collection. The treatment is accordingly different too, as there appears a tendency towards questioning: what is otherwise known as legend or generally acclaimed fact is approached with doubt in some of the poems, which can be understood as an effect and a consequence of the occasion of the journey. Rather than becoming immersed in the official discourse, the occasion of the contemplation reveals a more profound sense of division or border, the one between life and death. Although Elmer Kennedy-Andrews refers to Montague's speaker as an "epic hero, linking the details of his personal life with the larger crisis of culture",¹⁵ the tilting of the balance in the accounts of the last two sections of the collection towards the personal consequences of the communal destiny directs the focus of the collection more on that specific border that stretches between life and death, anticipating the poet's later sequence "Border Sick Call", where it is explicitly stated, by which act the practical effect of the political border becomes nearly irrelevant.

The poems of *The Dead Kingdom*, framed by the motif of an actual journey, represent an attempt of a complex and manifold exercise of border-crossing. The northward physical journey is put not only into the context of the funeral but natural parallels of the salmon's northward movement and the magnetic pole express the speaker's ties to the North, suggesting an inescapable, almost deterministic relation with the place of his childhood – which is all the more intriguing as it is not his own place of origin and the troubled family history does not turn it into an essential nest either. Nevertheless, the journey still allows for the reconsideration of that position and an attempt for restoration, however much that will be an imaginary exercise as it is constrained by the context itself.

While the journey that functions as the frame of the volume is an actual one, it is transformed into a more potent literary motif. The northward journey becomes the symbol of repossession, the speaker's attempt of control, of capturing and fixing in language and artistic form the fleeting personal

¹⁵ Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry*, 40

memories, of giving them shape and of organising them into a coherent narrative in which reasons and motivations are clarified and systematised almost in spite of themselves. The difficulty of understanding the close entanglement of personal and communal history and the resulting twists of the family story are reflected in analogies with the natural world, and there is an elegant dialectic of change and stability that the speaker involves to establish a delicate sense of balance in his project of reconstruction. References to the unintelligibility of the division underlying the reality of the North are at once expressions of the perplexed state of mind that the speaker still has to grapple with when trying to assess the fact of the passing of his mother, and his preference for short and tight lines reflect an attempt of control and discipline when treating the personal experience of decisive significance. As the journey involves the crossing of the physical border, that motif is broadened into a more encompassing trope in the collection, endowing the concept of the border with multiple levels of interpretation. If border crossing is seen as transition from one world to another, then the collection testifies to this in several ways, and the direction of the transition is not confined and determined either. That there is one particular transition in which the movement is unidirectional, it is the transition from a “flowering absence” to a “flowering presence” as this can be seen as the expression of the speaker’s shift of emphasis from primal hurt to potential hope that the promise of the future represented by the image of his own child will position the past firmly as a closed world. Yet the past becomes paradoxically open and accessible exactly for its having been closed – as the contemplating intellect reconstructs the vision of the past, it constitutes its elements, bringing it firmly under control and thus making it accessible at will. Crossing into that world becomes possible but only by the imagination – thus the border is undermined as well as retained simultaneously. This eventually illuminates the ambiguous title of the collection itself with its oxymoron-like linking of “dead” and “kingdom”, as the speaker’s control is over a world that does not exist in its physicality, yet as all human experience, it is an imaginative construct only. Nevertheless, that shift from “absence” to “presence” still indicates the validity of such a concept as that of the border as it allows for the delineation of experience, however arbitrary that delineation might be.

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